THE DISSOCIATION of HARUHI SUZUMIYA

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First released in Japan in 2003, *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* quickly established itself as a publishing phenomenon, drawing much of its inspiration from Japanese pop culture and Japanese comics in particular. With this foundation, the original publication of each book in the Haruhi series included several black-and-white spot illustrations as well as a four-page color insert—all of which are faithfully reproduced here to preserve the authenticity of the first-ever English edition.

PROLOGUE

I imagine that everybody has his or her own method for detecting the shifting of the year's seasons. In my case, over the past six months, the most obvious changes have been in the movements of my calico cat, Shamisen.

Shamisen has stopped crawling into bed with me in the middle of the night, which tells me that the region's most legitimately praiseworthy months have arrived, but it occurred to me that more responsive than any cat to the changing seasons should be the flora, with their finer sensitivity to changes in environment—and indeed, the cherry blossoms seem to be on the verge of blooming, as though having conferred and decided upon a schedule. The early April sky is so blue it looks as though it's been colored with a crayon, the sun shining with such brilliance that it must be trying to get in shape for summer. Yet despite the warmth of the sunshine that falls upon the ground, the wind that cascades down from the mountain is still a chilly wind indeed, reminding me that my current location possesses a respectably high altitude.

With nothing better to do, I looked vaguely up at the sky and uttered a statement so utterly pointless that the fact of its utterance can only be attributed to my total boredom.

"Guess it's spring," I said.

I didn't particularly require a response to the statement, but if the person beside me sensed that fact, he nonetheless decided to reply.

"It is without a doubt spring. And a new year for students has begun—a new calendar year and a new academic year. A new year for my heart, as well."

I supposed his excessively pleasant tone was well suited to spring and autumn. It would've been too much for summer, and in winter the only person I'd want close enough to me to hear such a whisper would have been Asahina.

Whether or not he noticed me switch into total-inattention mode, he

continued.

“This is our second spring as high school students, though I am unsure as to whether I should say that it has ‘finally’ arrived or ‘already’ arrived.”

Was that really worth agonizing over? I asked. In English, you’d use “yet” either way. I hardly remembered every moment of the past year, so if I were to think back, it would seem to have passed rather quickly, and since there was no way to know what was going to happen in the future, it didn’t really matter whether they happened “sooner” or “later.” As for what I was experiencing at a given moment, it would feel more or less brief depending on whether or not I was having fun. That was all there was to it. Seriously, get a clock. They just tick off the seconds without any complaint—although sometimes your alarm clock will fail to go off even though you don’t remember silencing it, which makes you want to chuck it over a wall. Especially on Monday mornings.

“That is indeed true. A clock’s hands are one of the few things in life that tell us something truly objective. But for humans, who can only experience time subjectively, it is but a guideline. What’s more important is what one thought and enacted within a given span of time.”

“Oh, brother.”

I stopped gazing at the shifting shapes of the clouds and looked beside me.

Next to me was one Itsuki Koizumi, smiling like always. Unlike the airplane contrail I’d been looking at, his face was neither pleasant nor unpleasant, merely normal, and there was nothing to be gained by gazing at it. I looked forward once again.

“In my humble opinion,” I began. As the image of the courtyard fell upon my retinas, Koizumi seemed to wait for me to continue. “I’d say spring is finally here.”

As my eyes followed the forms of the freshmen in their brand-spanking-new uniforms that were gathered there, my brain played back nostalgic scenes from the past year.

And I had to wonder.

Last year, had the second-year students looked down on me with this same

feeling?

I'd ended up in this particular high school thanks to the school district, and no sooner had I met the anomalous entity that was Haruhi Suzumiya than I'd heard her unbelievable self-introduction and, reeling, had been dragged into Haruhi's world and the mysterious organization known as the SOS Brigade, thereby meeting actual aliens, time travelers, and espers. That would've been crazy enough on its own, but each alien, time traveler, and esper had his or her own associated events in which I was forced to participate, not to mention Haruhi's constant wild schemes. There was no telling how much XP I'd earned over the past year. I was pretty sure I could take a mini-boss down with a single hit now.

"The force of habit is powerful indeed."

I'd become totally accustomed to the uphill walk that made school attendance such a pain, and as a result, I'd started getting up later, scheming to prolong physical exercise until the last possible moment. And I wasn't the only one who'd gotten used to school—Haruhi had undergone a similar transformation, like a carp swimming up a waterfall to become a dragon.

I seriously wanted to show a photo of the current Haruhi to last year's Haruhi. This is what you're gonna look like a year from now, I'd inform her.

But even if I could do that, I wouldn't.

"I quite agree." Koizumi half closed his eyes, pursing one corner of his mouth and crossing his arms and legs. "Regarding habit—the adaptability of humanity can be easily observed by noting the many places on Earth in which they live. But I've lately begun to wonder if there might be a drawback to that. Once one becomes accustomed to a circumstance, it might become more difficult to adapt to sudden, unforeseen changes."

What was he talking about, I wondered. If he meant Haruhi, she was being sudden and unforeseen most of the time, I pointed out.

"Yes, that is true, but…"

For once in his life, Koizumi seemed at a loss for words—and this was the guy who was constantly offering his opinion whether you asked for it or not. If I inquired further, I wouldn't be able to endure the terrible jargon-laden speech

I'd be subjected to.

Koizumi looked like he wanted to say something, but I turned away in order to break free of his gaze. He looked in the opposite direction. "…"

Speaking of wordlessness, a certain school-uniform-clad paragon of silence on the level of a Buddhist statue was there, the breeze gently stirring her hair.

It goes without saying that it was one Yuki Nagato, the SOS Brigade's own secret alien weapon, though at the moment it was more fitting to refer to her as the literature club president. Like Koizumi and me, she'd brought her desk and chair out to the courtyard, and she was situated a few meters away, silently reading. It seemed to be something about a philosopher, an artist, and a musician forming a golden braid of some kind, and as usual for Nagato, it was as thick as a concrete block.

I looked up at the clubroom building from the courtyard. Haruhi still hadn't returned from her errand to the clubroom; neither had Asahina, whom Haruhi had dragged along. At this rate I would've been perfectly happy to go the rest of the day without them returning—an outcome that would've been ideal for everyone—but I doubted I'd be so lucky.

So, then.

I've been slow in explaining the current circumstances, so here's a quick breakdown. It's after school, a few days after the beginning of our second year in high school. We'd brought our desks out to the courtyard, making a space for ourselves in one corner. Many other second-and third-year students had done similarly, though by no means all of them.

I could see members of the computer club among them. They'd set up several computers on a long table and were running some kind of CGish something-or-other on the monitors. It wasn't the space battle sim from before, but rather some kind of pastel-hued fortune-telling software, it looked like. Jumping at an opportunity, eh, Mr. Computer Club President? The fact that he was there made it clear that he'd managed to progress on to the third year of high school, though I didn't actually know if he was still serving as the president of his club. It didn't really matter to me. I'd just ask Nagato later.

Looking elsewhere, I could see various other groups I didn't recognize busily

jostling around. Among them were clubs and associations whose names I'd never even heard before, and the more I looked, the less I cared about any of it. There was absolutely no reason why we should be participating in this kind of event.

The only one of us with even a tenuous reason to be here was Nagato, honestly.

I gave her another look; she was as still and silent as if made of china.

Taped to the front of her desk—which itself was situated away from the main group—was a sign on which was handwritten LITERATURE CLUB in stark serif letters. The paper fluttered in the capricious spring breeze, as did Nagato's short hair, untouched by the hands of any beautician. Her eyes never left the pages of her book; she was so silent she seemed to be trying to disconnect herself from the surrounding world.

I'm sure you get the picture by now.

School clubs—especially the smaller, weirder ones—must recruit new members and explain their activities.

This was exactly what was happening here and now in the courtyard. The sports teams and clubs were set up in the gym or playing field, and the brass band and art club, who didn't really need to actively recruit in order to get new members, had set up shop in their respective dedicated classrooms. Here in the courtyard were the rest—the various clubs and societies whose existence and activities would be completely obscure without sufficient explanation.

Whoops, I almost forgot to mention it, since it goes without saying, but all the members of the SOS Brigade had most auspiciously made it to their next year of high school. Haruhi, Nagato, Koizumi, and I were all now second-year students, and Asahina was a third-year. I can't claim I didn't experience the tiniest tug at my heartstrings in saying farewell to good old classroom 1-5, but I doubted that much would change here in my second year. I should say that I am once again in the same class as Haruhi, and during the opening ceremonies when I met the rest of my classmates, there she was right behind me, every bit as arrogant as ever, though her arrogance was complicated by a strange expression, as though she were trying to mimic the sound a platypus makes.

“What’s this?” she announced, glaring at her classmates haughtily. “There’s practically no change from last year? I figured they’d shuffle things up, but no!”

I wanted to ask her whether she was happy or upset by that, but in any case, for once I agreed with Haruhi. We’d been placed in class 2-5, as had Taniguchi and Kunikida, and to top it all off, our homeroom teacher was still the famously concerned-for-his-students Okabe. Here and there were a few students whose faces I recognized but whose names I didn’t immediately remember, but the bulk of the class seemed to be composed of students from last year’s 1-5. I’d heard that this year there were barely enough science-track students to make up a whole class, so class 8 had been used to accommodate them, while the refugees from the previous class 8 were sprinkled around among the other seven classes. Also, a handful of students had simply been shuffled about from class to class. It was probably out of consideration to that minority that Okabe was making us do our self-introductions all over again.

Of course I quietly had my doubts about the outcome of the class sorting, and I voiced those doubts to the individuals I knew to be capable of such manipulation.

I received several answers:

“No,” said Nagato succinctly. “It is a coincidence,” she further elaborated.

“I haven’t manipulated a thing. It must have been the decision of the school administration. At the very least, the Agency has taken a hands-off approach to this situation,” said Koizumi with a pained smile. “It must be a coincidence.”

That seemed to be the truth.

I did know of one girl who had the ability to make coincidence into inevitability, but I wasn’t going to quibble.

I wondered if Asahina and Tsuruya were classmates again. If so, it could very well have been due to the Tsuruya family’s machinations, but I wasn’t going to make any noise about that either. Whatever our differences in class or year, we’d all wind up in the same place after school anyway.

What I was worried about—what I had good reason to be worried about—was something else entirely. Who lurked among the new freshmen I was currently

looking at?

I personally knew an alien. I had known an upperclassman from the future. I couldn't escape the fact that the classmate I'd spent the most time talking to was an esper.

However.

That day, that fateful moment, Haruhi's self-introduction had stunned the entire class, save for those who knew her from East Middle School. Of all the entities that she mentioned in her speech, I cannot forget that there is still one who has yet to make an appearance.

Sliders.

Yes. Of course, while I have no desire for such an entity to appear, she might very well be feeling their absence. And as all of us have successfully moved on to our next academic year, one might very well be even now taking a seat as a first-year high school student…

"Geez." I moved my head to loosen my stiff shoulders, then commenced observation of the freshmen.

If you see anybody with potential, secure them immediately—thus had our fearless brigade chief ordered. I couldn't help but wonder what easy-to-spot traits amounted to "potential" in Haruhi's view.

Incidentally, I may as well say that when class 2-5 held its self-introductions, Haruhi did not repeat her stunt from the previous year. Instead, she was refreshingly simple.

"I am Haruhi Suzumiya, chief of the SOS Brigade. That is all!" was all she said, with a bold smile that stirred the hair on the back of my head.

She clearly considered that more than enough introduction.

And to be fair, for our classmates, it was enough. Not a one of them was ignorant of Haruhi Suzumiya and her SOS Brigade.

If anyone was ignorant—

I gazed vaguely at the school-branded uniform shoes of the students who now milled about the courtyard.

If anyone was ignorant, they would be among these students.

There beside the cherry trees that were just starting to show their leaves, Koizumi and I (with Nagato a short distance away) were idly passing the time when I saw a figure moving effortlessly through the crowd of students, like Moses leading his people out of Egypt.

I remembered his face; in a way, he was the reason I'd wound up out here killing time. The sleeves of his blazer fluttered jauntily, and as he walked through the falling petals, he was the very image of phony influence and power. It made me feel as though I were on a cut-rate stage with a cheap background.

"It has been a while," said the student council president in a severe voice, stopping in front of us.

Unfortunately, it had not in fact been "a while." I wasn't going to forget the face that had subjected the entire assembled school to a lengthy speech during the opening ceremony.

"My regards," he said, unnecessarily adjusting his glasses as though following a script, then regarding us unpleasantly, like a leader displeased with his disciples. "Where is the brigade chief? I've taken the trouble of coming over to address one or two complaints I have, yet nowhere do I see your leader."

Indeed, wherever might she be? I wasn't her secretary nor her agent, I said, and I had no idea of the whereabouts of any classmate as restless as she was.

"I suppose it cannot be helped. I will put it to you, then: what exactly are you doing here?"

I'd hoped that if I kept my mouth shut, Koizumi would reply instead, but for whatever reason the pretty boy of the SOS Brigade only smiled beatifically.

"Isn't it obvious?" I shot back.

His Excellency the President looked down at us, his expression an iron mask. "Indeed it is. I know where we are, and I know what you are, so the answer is quite clear. I am here because I suspected that, however slight the chance, you were planning something quite beyond my imagination. But you are not. In which case, you surely know what I am about to ask next."

That was because his actions never differed one iota from expectations. Honestly, the conversation probably would've gone smoother if Haruhi had been here…

But wait a sec. Why was the president maintaining his haughty act, despite Haruhi not being here? Wasn't he just a puppet, propped up by Koizumi's Agency?

Or could it be—was it for the benefit of the other students in the courtyard? Our little corner was removed from the rest, though, and so long as nobody was trying to eavesdrop, it seemed unlikely that our conversation would be overheard. The only person who might hear was Nagato, who sat a few meters away, but anything that would actually worry her was probably something only the CIA or NORAD knew about.

"Then I am done here. My inspection of the humanities clubs is complete. Miss Kimidori, go on ahead to the playing field. I'll be just a moment."

"Understood."

The brief statement from the girl caused me to notice her presence for the first time. I managed to stifle an exclamation of surprise, instead spitting out my recognition.

"… Kimidori?"

"Yes," she replied, bowing courteously.

Prior to hearing her voice, I hadn't noticed her at all. I couldn't hide my shock at that fact. It was as though she'd been concealed in the president's shadow, revealing her form only when she spoke—that was how sudden her appearance had seemed.

Miss Emiri Kimidori, first-ever client of the SOS Brigade and one-time girlfriend of the computer club president, smiled the smile of the well-brought-up lady, giving another brief bow. I was so taken aback that I couldn't help but bow in return.

… Ah-ha, so this was the cause of the president's conceited manner. He was hiding his true nature from Kimidori, though I doubted there was any need to do that.

In any case, where'd the custom of the president always appearing with the secretary come from? He oughta give the treasurer or vice president a shot once in a while, I told him.

"If that is your wish, perhaps I shall," said the president, pushing his glasses up again. "However, if the treasurer wished to speak with any one of you, it would be with the president of the literature club."

As far as that went, a little birdie named Koizumi had told me about it. It had been last year, when by the order of the student council, each club had to submit an operating budget. Despite having but a single member, the literature club was technically still a club, and its representative attended the budget meeting. That representative was obviously not Haruhi, but one Yuki Nagato. Right up to the last minute, Haruhi kept offering to go in Nagato's place or to go along with her, but if the ringleader of the group that was illegally occupying the literature club's room showed up at that meeting to stir up trouble, things would have really gotten out of hand.

In the end she sulked and pouted, but she listened to Koizumi's and my pleas, eventually letting Nagato go alone, silently watching her leave like a general sending a hostage to an enemy nation.

Nagato returned about an hour later, budget funds in hand—quite an accomplishment, since the literature club barely had enough membership to even qualify as an inactive organization.

The rumor going around was that nobody had any idea what had happened, what methods she'd used. All Nagato had done was quietly take her seat at the table and stare wordlessly at the student council treasurer. The annual budget meeting was always a disorderly affair, but apparently this time it had been concluded smoothly and quietly.

Sounding self-congratulatory, the president spoke.

"Of course, it's a meeting in name only, as Kimidori and I had already decided upon the budget. Although—I had my expectations, but the literature club was the only irregular one. It's a bit late to quibble. So long as you use the budget for club activities, I'll make no complaints. If you don't, I will. That's all there is to say."

Having silently listened to the president, Kimidori suddenly spoke up. “If that will be all, Mr. President, I’ll be going.”

“Good work, Miss Kimidori.”

Kimidori gave us one last bow, smiling freshly before heading off to the playing field, leaving behind the faint scent of lilies.

The entire time, there had been not a single moment of eye contact between Nagato and Kimidori. Perhaps they were similar enough to be able to communicate without words. Or perhaps it was just because Nagato hadn’t bothered to look up from her book.

“Moving on to the main reason for my visit, then,” said the president, removing his glasses and letting them dangle from his fingertips. “There’s no point in a discussion unless she is here. When will she be back?”

Soon, I said. I doubted that an Asahina costume change would take too much time.

“Fine. I’ll content myself to wait.”

The president was really hamming it up. It was like he’d been president for three years, I said.

“In spite of my best efforts. I assumed that student council work would be nothing but a pain, but…” The president grinned, finally showing a glimpse of his true self. “It’s actually pretty fun. When I’m playing the president in front of the faculty or administration”—he slapped his own cheek lightly—“sometimes I forget which is the real me. Sometimes being somebody else ain’t half bad.”

“It’s fine to be assuming a persona,” said Koizumi seriously, finally speaking up. “But don’t let the mask you’re wearing consume you. How many tomb raiders have become mummies themselves?”

“An archaeologist raiding a tomb doesn’t turn into a mummy—he turns into a corpse.” The president revealed a predatory smile, wiping his glasses lenses on his shirt sleeve, then replacing them on his face. “Don’t worry, Koizumi. I’ve got it covered. Just remember…”

Having replaced his glasses, he’d become once again the perfect student

council president, and it was hard to tell which was the real him.

"… Keeping a leash on that insane girl of yours is your job."

The president's gaze fell on the entrance to the clubroom building, from which our glorious brigade chief emerged, face full of cheer like a wild animal joyful over the arrival of spring, accompanied by the SOS Brigade's official maid, the very incarnation of sunshine and warmth.

Haruhi emerged with a cardboard box in one hand, dragging Asahina along in the other, a satisfied grin on her face. But no sooner did she glimpse the student council president than she knit her brows in obvious irritation.

"Hey, hey!" Haruhi strode forward purposefully, not letting go of Asahina, who flailed behind her. "Ah-*ha*! I knew it. Just as I thought. I leave for one second, and guess who shows up? Well, too bad for you. We're not doing a single thing that the student council can complain about!"

I wondered about that, actually. Just what was it that she was planning to instigate here in the courtyard, for starters?

"Oh… the president."

I didn't care that Asahina was wearing her maid outfit as she blinked her eyes rapidly; that was no more surprising to me these days than seeing weeds growing in a vacant lot.

"Hey, Haruhi," I said. "What's with your getup?"

It was the first I'd seen of it. When had she had time to get her hands on that thing? I asked her.

"What, you got a problem? Is there something wrong with wearing a cheongsam?"

Just as she suggested, Haruhi was wearing a long scarlet dress that sported a Chinese dragon gaudily executed in lamé and embroidery. A slit ran down the side to flatter her legs. It was even sleeveless, for crying out loud.

Having so raucously burst upon the scene, Haruhi was now the focus of the gathering students' attention. Similarly, Asahina the Maid had also wound up the object of many stares, and the sight of her fidgeting awkwardly at their gazes

was one I would've rather monopolized, anti-trust legislation be damned.

"If you were at a party, then no, there'd be nothing wrong with it. But this is school, and you're in front of a bunch of new students to boot. Would it kill you to consider being appropriate?"

"I did consider that! That's why I'm wearing this!" said Haruhi in response to my reasonable logic. "What I really wanted to wear was the bunny-girl outfit, but I knew everybody would just complain, so I went for the China style. You should be thankful!"

She seemed to want to point at the president confrontationally, but then realized that both of her hands were full. She let Asahina go and dropped the cardboard box on my desk. Her hands now free, she pointed grandiosely at the president.

"You should be thankful!" she repeated.

The president, however, was unperturbed. "Your 'consideration' is nothing of the sort. As a president sworn to uphold student morality, I cannot accept this. I presume you're familiar with the phrase 'six of one, half a dozen of the other.' Your choice of dress amounts to the same thing."

"What of it? You're saying they're all the same, then?"

"No, I am merely trying to avoid confusing the students who come here full of hope for their futures. I cannot allow things that would inflame the boys' passions."

"Inflame their passions? That's ridiculous. Listen—guys who get worked up by that stuff are going to get just as worked up by school uniforms and gym clothes. Or are you saying we should just come to class naked?"

There was a limit to how much one was willing to argue, and the president seemed to have reached his. "This is pointless," he spat.

"Is it? I'd hope that you'd learn to respect student independence. Once school's over, we should be able to wear what we want. It's not like I'm going to wear it to and from school, right? Don't you think so, Mikuru?"

"Oh, um, yes, I don't think I'd want to walk home in—" Asahina shook her

head slightly, her voice tiny. She looked at Haruhi's cheongsam-ed form and sighed, sounding somehow envious. Had she wanted to wear it?

Still, compared with last year when they'd both worn bunny-girl outfits and passed out flyers next to the school's front gate, this was progress. Certainly the percentage of exposed skin had fallen. Still, I wasn't sure whether it was a good idea for second-and third-year students to be getting in costume in front of first-years, especially not when there was no real point to it, I said.

"There is too a point! I mean, c'mon, look how much we stand out!"

Yeah, but what point was there in standing out for no good reason? I asked.

Haruhi took a good hard look at me. Just as I was starting to feel like a piece of tiny krill in front of an oncoming whale, Haruhi popped up behind Nagato, who was still silently reading.

"Kyon, have you forgotten exactly what we're here to do? You have two seconds to answer."

Umm.

"Time's up!" she declared, giving me essentially no time to answer. She shook her finger in my face, then rested it on Nagato's shoulder, who was so motionless she looked freeze-dried. "We are here to help Yuki. This is not about recruiting new SOS Brigade members. Try to understand that much, okay?"

This last part was directed at the president. The girl in question, Nagato, only turned the page of her book.

"Hmph." The student council president did not so much as flinch. After adjusting his glasses with his finger, he spoke. "So, Suzumiya, you are saying that despite not being a member of the literature club, you are assisting that club in recruiting new members."

I appreciated him articulating Haruhi's motivations so clearly.

"Yup." Haruhi puffed out her chest even more proudly, then pointed to the desks where Koizumi and I were. "See, those two are just sitting there with their desks doing nothing, right? There's no paper saying 'SOS Brigade,' and Kyon looks even more out of it than usual."

That last line wasn't necessary.

"Oh ho." The president tucked his chin down, his glasses reflecting pointlessly. "Well, then, Suzumiya. What is in the box you just brought out? Some sort of sign, perhaps?"

"It's a sign." Haruhi grabbed the stave that was sticking out of the box, pulling it out decisively.

At the end of the white-painted wooden stick were affixed two pieces of plywood, also painted white, upon which had been written LITERATURE CLUB in Haruhi's handwriting. It went without saying that the menial tasks of cutting the wood, assembling the pieces, and painting the sign had fallen to me.

"See, it says 'Literature Club,' right? I'm going to make Mikuru carry it around. After all, if we left it to Yuki, she wouldn't make any active appeals."

This was the truth. The first-year students had time in their schedules set aside for club introductions, and that had evidently happened yesterday. I say "evidently" because the SOS Brigade had no opportunity to intervene, as the only person invited had been the president of the literature club, one Yuki Nagato. The students had assembled in the gym, and there in front of them Nagato had, in the voice of a TV news anchor reading off the weather forecasts for major world cities, presented a talk entitled "A Neurological Perspective on the Insufficiency of Verbal Discourse between Individuals." Obviously this had nothing to do with the literature club, and as a bonus, it managed to put half the first-years to sleep. Thanks to the pseudo-hypnotic speech she delivered, if there had been any students who were interested in joining the literature club, the boredom that suffused the gym that day would've effectively purged such notions from them. Yuki Nagato was a force to be reckoned with.

But it didn't seem to bother her at all. Left to her own devices today, she would've probably just gone straight to the clubroom and commenced reading. But Haruhi did not leave her to her own devices.

The prospect of recruiting new members would be too tantalizing for Haruhi's invisible antennae to pass up.

But wait just a second. To be clear, the SOS Brigade was an unsanctioned organization, and even now was operating illegally within the school. We

couldn't recruit overtly. Once Haruhi might've gone for that anyway, but this year the student council president's eye was on us. So what fun could be had today?

The cash register bell in Haruhi's head had gone off, and thus on this day—one of those chilly spring days worth their weight in gold—the brigade had been drafted as volunteers for the literature club and were now killing time in the courtyard.

—So that's the story of how we got here, but every story has its flip side.

The student council president seemed easily able to sense that.

"May I see the other side of that sign?"

"Sure." Haruhi grinned and flicked her wrist. On the reverse of the sign that said LITERATURE CLUB it said… LITERATURE CLUB. Obviously it didn't say SOS BRIGADE.

"You seem eminently prepared. Very well, then. I cannot claim there is no logic to what you've said." The president pushed his glasses up by their bridge. "Though it is not in my nature to compromise, it is better than causing a needless conflict. So long as you do not interfere with the other clubs, you may quietly stay here until the day is out. I will be busy with inspections. Forcible recruiting is absolutely forbidden."

He should've told that to the athletic clubs, I said. This was a dreary public school, and every club was short on promising new recruits.

"You're quite right. I'll do that. And now, one last question. It is all well and good for you to recruit new literature club members. But should you succeed, what will you do? Will you turn the clubroom over to them?"

"That's none of your business!" Haruhi's habit of speaking her mind to upperclassmen hadn't changed since she'd become a second-year student herself. Haruhi sniffed and looked askance.

"Hmph. That is all, then. Good-bye."

His Excellency the President looked sharply at Haruhi and Asahina, as if to burn the image of the cheongsam and maid outfit onto film, then calmly followed

Kimidori and left.

What had he come here to accomplish? Didn't he realize standing in front of Haruhi and telling her "no" was practically begging her to do whatever it was you didn't want her to do? Haruhi's face was even now splitting into that high-spirited grin of hers.

"Well, that went well. Easy as pie. Tasty, tasty pie."

Haruhi waited for the president to be out of sight, stuck the pole of the sign she held into the ground, and peeled the veneer from the sign's surface. As I regarded the construction, I was unsurprised. The poor LITERATURE CLUB lettering was now so much litter, and there was no doubt about what the second layer of the sign now proclaimed—

SOS BRIGADE.

Last May—what day had it been, anyway?—the "Save the World by Overloading it with Fun Haruhi Suzumiya Brigade" had been formed, and it seemed that the name would be remaining in good health for some time to come.

The cardboard box Haruhi had brought contained more than signs.

Haruhi foisted one sign off onto Asahina, then like a magician's assistant produced item after item from within the box, the skirt of her China dress aflutter.

First was an LCD monitor; then a series of cords, cables, and adapters; followed finally by a new college-style notebook and writing implements.

"C'mon, set it up!" Haruhi ordered me. "Get the monitor working."

There were no electrical outlets in the courtyard, but Haruhi had anticipated the problem. There would be no point in trying to resist, so I did as I was told, dragging the power cable over to the computer club's booth.

"Sorry, but could we borrow your power?"

"Sure." It was the computer club president who replied. Evidently he was still president, since it was written on the ID badge that hung on his chest. "The other members wouldn't let me go," he said, sounding vaguely proud of it. "So I

said I'd do it for one semester. I have been thinking about my replacement, though. Whoever it is, I'm gonna have to train him or her carefully—"

This speech seemed like it was going to take a while, so I wished he'd have done it later. At this rate, his fellow members were going to start hoping he'd retire.

"Hey, actually," said the president, lowering his voice and speaking rapidly past the back of his hand, which was raised conspiratorially to his mouth. "I'd like Nagato to have concurrent membership in both our clubs, so she can become president of the computer club too. She's the most talented computer programmer I've ever seen or heard of. No matter the bug or error, she can magically fix it, as easily as flipping a switch. Every time she stops by the club she finds a new way to surprise me. We've got a custom-built machine set aside for her, and in practically no time she wrote a new OS that would blow the original manufacturer away. Nobody but her can even begin to understand or use the source code either. It's perfectly compatible with every piece of hardware and software we tested it with, but we just don't know how she did it—"

No matter how long he went on about it, I was only going to be able to tell him that yup, that was our Nagato. If he wanted to make a personal request, he should have been making it directly to the person in question, I told him. She'd probably explain everything. I doubted anyone on Earth could understand the explanation, though.

I dangled the end of the power cable. The third-year president of the computer club correctly inferred my meaning, and he happily plugged it into their extension cord. It was amazing how much the computer club had turned into a branch of the SOS Brigade. If someone didn't put a stop to it soon, the SOS Brigadification of all humanity might be completed before desertification consumed the world. Although I want to believe that *Homo sapiens* aren't quite that stupid.

After getting the cord plugged in, I unrolled the cable as I walked back, and was then greeted by Haruhi, who came up to me like a dog returning to its master with a Frisbee.

It was good to be cheerful. Especially for Koizumi, I thought to myself, and glanced his way. But the self-proclaimed boy esper did not seem especially pleased. He sat with his elbows on his desk, his fingers interlaced and supporting his chin, mouth hidden. What was his preoccupation? He seemed to be gazing unobtrusively at Nagato, which also puzzled me.

What was going on? Was there some rule that the members of the SOS Brigade had to become emotionally disturbed in order? Was it now Koizumi's turn? Give me a break. Nagato and Asahina were one thing, but I'd been certain that Koizumi was the one guy I didn't have to worry about.

Perhaps sensing my concern, Koizumi slowly looked my way, his eyes narrowing in a smile. He might have been smiling to make me feel better; I detected something artificial in his expression.

He'd been in Class 9, the math and science class, and along with his classmates had moved right on into the second year of that class as though carried by gondola, so it was unlikely anybody he couldn't stand was suddenly in his class.

Haruhi was her usual energetic self, so I doubted that she was to blame for his state. I wondered if his boss in the Agency had docked his pay or something. But

wasn’t that a good thing? Wasn’t it better for all of us if Koizumi had nothing to do?

Or perhaps even this early in the semester, he’d received a lovely envelope in his shoe locker from a new first-year student confessing her feelings, in which case my sympathy was as pointless as Shamisen’s shed hair. After all, if you lined up Koizumi and Haruhi silently next to each other, both of them had attention-grabbing good looks.

“C’mon, Kyon, play the video already!”

Haruhi ordered me with a smile, holding up her sign like she was the winner of the Miss China competition. I obediently did as I was told, and Koizumi got up to help me. As we were futzing around with connecting the DVD player to the LCD display, Koizumi had his normal pleasant smile on, but I kept getting a strange feeling from him.

Why did he keep glancing at me with that smile of his? Unfortunately, while I might accept meaningful eye contact from Asahina or Nagato, I didn’t have the skill necessary to understand a guy’s intentions from his gaze.

Once we’d gotten the AV equipment hooked up and I’d vaguely informed Haruhi of our completion, she nodded with satisfaction, like a fisherman who’d just discovered a large school of fish.

“Now, then.”

She rummaged through the cardboard box and produced a single disc. The DVD player’s tray opened reluctantly, and Haruhi tossed the disc into it, mashing the play button as impudently as she would ring the doorbell of her own house.

Immediately a suspicious image appeared on the LCD display, accompanied by a familiar sound that leaked from its speakers.

Asahina flinched. “Ah—”

She let slip a heavy sigh, slowly averting her eyes from the screen. The sight of her aroused a manly protective instinct in me.

“Haruhi, turn the volume down, will ya? If the president hears it he’s gonna come back.”

“Who cares! I’m not afraid of him in the slightest.”

Well, you should be, I told her.

“If he comes back, I’ll be happy to hold a public debate with him.”

Don’t you dare, I said.

“God, Kyon, you’re so annoying.” Haruhi adroitly arranged her mouth and eyes into inverted triangles of displeasure. “You and Koizumi can just wait here. Mikuru and I will handle the rest.” She wrapped her arms around Asahina’s waist, then pulled her in, grinning maniacally.

“Eek!” cried a timid Asahina.

Haruhi nuzzled up against the newly minted third-year maid, grinning maliciously. “If anybody interesting comes by, you gotta write down his or her name and class number, got it? And we are not the film club, so if anybody comes over thinking that, you chase ’em off. Are we clear?”

Having made these unilateral declarations, Haruhi forcibly dragged Asahina off for a tour around the courtyard.

“Ugh.” I slumped and pulled the SOS Brigade sign out of the ground and hid it behind a chair, then gazed at the contents of the LCD display, its brightness turned pointlessly up to the maximum.

It was none other than a trailer for *The Revenge of Yuki Nagato Episode 00*, a short film that one couldn’t help but imagine was a waste of electricity and digital tape.

Before the new term started, there was a not-particularly-long spring break, but of course Haruhi was not going to quietly wait around for the new school year to start.

I imagined she’d started thinking about doing another movie around the time of the baseball tournament and the incident with Sakanaka’s dog. Spring break involves much less homework than the winter and summer vacations, which made it perfect for taking it easy, but the members of the SOS Brigade were summoned to action nearly every day of the break and dispatched by Haruhi to any number of locations like so many Tomahawk missiles.

We went all over the place—antique shops, flea markets, then over to Sakanaka's place to check up on little Rousseau. We were invited over to the Tsuruya estate's grand gardens to enjoy a flower-viewing party, which I admit was pretty fun. I was astonished at the way Tsuruya had but to snap her fingers to get mountains of party food brought out from the house.

Basically Haruhi went wherever she was invited to go, and even when she wasn't invited she'd find a way in, breathing deeply in the spring air as she ran us all over creation. It remains a mystery to me how she didn't run out of energy.

Among all that running around, what Haruhi devoted the most energy to was the sequel to her school festival film, *The Adventure of Mikuru Asahina Episode 00*. While I was surprised that a footnote like that had become the main event, I never thought that Haruhi would start planning for the next year's school festival before she even became a second-year student herself.

So it was that Haruhi once again took up her megaphone and armband, and no sooner had the video camera, which had collected dust in a corner of the clubroom for months, been shoved into my hands than Haruhi began to peel off Asahina's clothes, at which Koizumi and I immediately did an about-face.

While it was now Yuki Nagato occupying the title role, it seemed that Mikuru Asahina would again be the protagonist (wait, hadn't Itsuki Koizumi been the protagonist in the last one?), and incidentally, because Mikuru's true form was a combat waitress from the future, Director Haruhi declared it necessary for her to wear that inappropriate outfit yet again. Yuki Nagato again wore a pointy black hat and cape over her school uniform, and she carried a star-tipped wand; Koizumi again carried the reflecting board around.

Since the spring cherry blossoms were conveniently in bloom, we could easily continue the setting of the previous film. I couldn't help but feel a little sympathy for the riverside cherry trees, though, having to bloom twice in one year.

But as to why we were doing a trailer, Haruhi broke it to us this way after we assembled, despite it being spring break, in the clubroom.

"Have you ever felt tricked by a trailer?"

I asked Haruhi what kind of "tricked" she meant.

“I’m talking about movie trailers. They play on TV or before other movies all the time. And when you see ’em, you’re like, ‘Whoa, that looks awesome,’ right? And then you get excited and go see the actual film, and it’s total nonsense. For example—”

I didn’t need an example, but Haruhi named an American film that even I recognized.

“You’d think from its trailer that it’d be really good and super funny. It was just a commercial, but I laughed at it a bunch. So I was really excited to go see it on opening day.” Haruhi gave her head an exaggerated shake. “But it was totally lame. You want to know why? They’d taken the only good scenes in the movie and strung them together to make the trailer. I’d already seen them all before going to the movie, and on top of that they were the only good parts! What do you think of that?”

What was I supposed to think of that? Maybe she should’ve called the studio. They probably had some kind of department in charge of trailers, and the workers there were surely good at their jobs.

“Even if it is for the sake of marketing, I just think it’s weird to show all the good parts of a movie ahead of time. That is why, Kyon!” Haruhi’s eyes glittered with their characteristic cosmic light. “We’ll make the trailer first, then work out the rest of the movie later! There’s no limit to how great we can make a short preview film. We don’t need a climax or anything; we just need a bunch of highlights! So that’s the plan.”

That was the plan, so that’s why we wound up making a trailer for a film that didn’t actually exist. Even Haruhi wasn’t thinking about what kind of story would be in the second film. Yet she planned on using the piece to attract new members. We didn’t have a script. What to do? Why, of course! Just shoot a trailer!

Her reasoning was direct; I’ll give her that. I could see she hadn’t given up on burning copies of *The Adventure of Mikuru Asahina Episode 00* to DVD and selling them off. We could’ve edited it down for this latest promotional purpose, but she seemed to think that giving people even a glimpse of it would be to our disadvantage. Or maybe she wanted people to join the brigade if they wanted to

see more of it. It would just give them a headache, although as a promotional video for Asahina you'd have to give it a twelve out of ten.

I glanced at the monitor we'd brought all the way out here as I returned to my seat and sat down.

It seemed almost reluctant to display the parade of ripped-off scenes, whose only possible justification would be in the name of parody.

There was the one where Koizumi brandished a dimly glowing stick that suspiciously resembled a fluorescent tube, to whom Yuki explained without any particular context, "Itsuki, I am your mother." Or the one where Yuki puts on glasses and is suddenly an ordinary citizen, but when she takes them off she instantly changes costume and flies right into the sky. Or the one where she drags a black coffin around in the wilderness. Or the one where having finally run out of ideas, Haruhi decided that Mikuru and Shamisen would switch personalities, which involved Asahina walking around saying, "Meow, meow!" while Haruhi recorded Shamisen's lines, which of course didn't match the movements of his mouth in the slightest—since he didn't open his mouth at all. On and on it went, with scenes that might have looked promising at a glance, but without any story simply cascaded like dominoes, with scene after scene having different characters and settings, the tempo of editing so bad it was nonsensical. On top of all that were the special effects, which were so bad it seemed like we'd made them that way on purpose, and the capriciously added music clips, which to be honest were basically noise.

Despite having no obligation to appear, Tsuruya showed up in a traditional kimono, laughing heartily in front of a Japanese-style garden filled with cherry blossoms, with my little sister and Shamisen inexplicably included in the shot. It was no better than a home video. This was thanks to Haruhi having brought the video camera along during our flower-viewing party and pointlessly shooting footage. The junk footage was an insult to bad movies; I didn't need to see it again to know that it would be worse than the original. At least the scenes of a waitress-outfitted Asahina jumping around succeeded at promoting her. I wondered how many people who saw this would even realize it was a trailer, save for Haruhi shouting, "*The Revenge of Yuki Nagato*, coming this fall at the school festival!"

Can I just ask one thing? Yuki went flying off into space at the end of the last movie, so how is she back on Earth?

“I’ll think about that next. New enemies too!” said ultra-director Haruhi.

Which meant that she hadn’t thought about it at all. This was the epitome of marrying in haste and repenting at leisure; the film was a sham. If there were any first-year students who would watch it and want to join the club, I’d ask them to withdraw their applications.

The same went for the rubberneckers whose attention had been captured by Haruhi’s cheongsam and Asahina’s maid outfit.

The students milling about the courtyard had all escaped middle school and transcended the bounds of compulsory public education, which meant this was not just an institutional problem, and they circled widely around the desks where Koizumi and I sat, cold-faced, making no move to approach.

Their decision was every bit as wise as that of the rat that deserts the sinking ship. The youths before me would never understand just how fortunate they were to be enjoying a normal, healthy high school life. But I knew, and I didn’t feel the slightest reluctance to inform them. At this age, a year’s difference is like a swallowtail butterfly larva progressing from the fourth to the fifth stage in its development. Even if you were just messing around, you wouldn’t go walking around a field if you knew there were land mines buried there.

I turned the volume down on Haruhi’s terrible movie, then glanced sideways again.

“…”

Nagato was so still she looked like a laptop that had gone into standby mode to conserve energy. No one else was at her desk. I wasn’t sure if I should’ve been happy on Haruhi’s behalf or not, but as yet no first-year students had approached with any interest in creative literary activities.

Last year the literature club’s sole activity was a newsletter Haruhi had happily supervised at the behest of the student council president (who’d in turn been manipulated by Koizumi), and thanks to our careless distribution of it, we had but one copy left, which lay in front of Nagato at her desk as a sample of the

club's functions. Every contributor to the newsletter, including me, had been given a copy, but it seemed that such hard-won spoils were not easily parted from people, and nobody was inclined to offer up their copy as a sample—not even Taniguchi, despite how much he'd complained.

Which all meant that if someone wanted to read the newsletter, their only choice was to read the sample that was normally housed in Nagato's clubroom library.

I gazed at Nagato, whose deep interest in the book in front of her never wavered.

"…"

She looked up, turning the transparent light in her eyes toward me. It was such a natural movement that it took me a moment to realize that our eyes had met, and as the awareness of it suddenly came to me—

"The cat," she said in her zephyr-like voice; it took me a full second to realize what she'd said as I endured the scrutiny of her evaluating gaze.

"What about the cat?" I asked.

"How is it."

"What do you mean, 'how'?"

Nagato seemed to think for a moment, though her head's position did not change. "How is it?"

Though she'd only added a hint of the interrogative to her phrasing, I now understood.

"Oh, you mean Shamisen."

She nodded minutely. "Yes."

"He's doing great. Doesn't seem inclined to talk these days."

"I see," was all the reply she gave before returning to her reading.

So she'd been concerned about the strangely clever cat that lived at my house. Oh, right, Nagato was the one who'd turned him into the host for that whatever-it-was data life-form symbiont thing whose name I couldn't remember.

Ever since then, he hadn't really changed save for putting on weight thanks to his overeating and lack of exercise. Ever since Haruhi'd found him and foisted him off on me, he'd been living the perfect cat life.

The old phrase "spring, when skies are cloudy and cats fat," came to mind, but I wasn't so sure. I'd wanted to laze around cat-style during spring break, but it hadn't happened that way.

"It certainly was a busy spring break," said Koizumi, lamenting. He was staring out into space, so I thought he was talking to himself, but—

"Don't you think?" he prompted.

The smile he directed at me as he asked the question seemed a little tired to me, I said.

"There's no question about it. You're quite right. I am a bit fatigued."

Of course he was, I said. Any normal person would be exhausted if they had to keep up with Haruhi.

"I am not speaking in conventional terms. You do remember my true nature and responsibility, don't you? The real reason why I am here?"

At first it was to observe Haruhi, and then it became being her flunky, I said.

"Excuse me, but surely you haven't forgotten that I am an esper, nor have you forgotten when, where, how, and with whom my powers are utilized."

I remembered all right, having gotten enough of an earful about it. His confession had come after Nagato's and Asahina's—in other words, it was the most recent information about a brigade member to come to light.

"That's good. That will make this easier to explain." Koizumi gave an affectedly relieved sigh, then lowered his voice. "To be honest, I haven't been sleeping well recently. I've been waking up in the middle of the night or early morning, day after day, and not because I want to. It's taken quite a toll on my health."

If he couldn't sleep at night, why not just sleep in class? I said. They say five minutes of sleeping in class is worth an hour of regular sleep, after all.

"It's not that I'm suffering from insomnia. And the problem isn't internal. Surely you can see. We understand each other, after all, so let's save the

circumspection for a different topic.”

Koizumi’s narrowed eyes glinted seriously—how unusual. He usually loved talking in circles, but had he decided to change his habits? Well, fine. He was right that we knew each other pretty well. Although I didn’t know if I’d trust him more than I would Nagato or Asahina.

“You’re talking about closed space and <Celestials>,” I said.

That was pretty much the only place where his powers worked.

“Quite right. Of late they have been appearing with greater frequency, beginning during spring break and continuing up to today. To be accurate, they started on the last day of spring break, but that’s why my little part-time job now has me on twenty-four-hour alert.” Koizumi let slip a self-deprecating sigh. “I truly thought I had gotten used to it. After all, fighting <Celestials> was part of our daily routine. You could say it was our duty. But this past year we’ve gotten out of shape. Ever since she started the SOS Brigade last year, Suzumiya’s mental state has rapidly stabilized. Especially once you and Suzumiya returned from that place.”

It was true that Koizumi had reported the lower incidence of <Celestial> appearance to me just before Christmas. It was right around Christmas Eve, when Taniguchi had been bragging about getting a girlfriend.

And then to make up for it, somebody else had done something totally crazy.

“No, wait a sec—” I sensed an inconsistency. “Koizumi, didn’t you see Haruhi just now? She was totally happy. I had to check to make sure her feet were physically touching the ground. It was like she had wings on her shoes. And you said that closed space nonsense and those stupid blue monsters appeared because of her pent-up stress. But she’s so busy these days she’s got no time to be bored, so it just doesn’t stand up to reason.”

“It’s true; Suzumiya looks quite happy to my eye as well. She certainly doesn’t have too much time on her hands. But I’d like you to think back to the events of the last day of spring break.”

I’d been thinking back to it constantly, I told him.

“Doesn’t anything stick out to you? Surely something does. Something quite

important.” Koizumi shrugged. “It was on the last day of spring break. That was the day Haruhi began to shift at a subconscious level. So what happened?”

More subconscious stuff, huh? As if Koizumi’s pseudo-psychological quackery didn’t cause me enough trouble already. “That was the day we went to the flea market, right? Haruhi said she wanted to get in on a flea market, so we took a train to the next town over—”

“It was before we boarded the train. What I’m trying to point out is…”

His roundaboutness was so irritating.

I closed my eyes and drifted out again into the sea of memory.

It was early in the spring break, and we were in the clubroom getting ready to shoot the trailer for the sequel.

Once she’d gotten Asahina into the waitress outfit and Nagato into the witch’s cap and cloak, Haruhi lined them up in preparation for the shoot and regarded them, yellow megaphone in hand, whereupon Koizumi and I returned from our voluntary exile. Haruhi looked up at us.

“Don’t you think there’s too much stuff in this room? I was just looking for my Director armband, but it’s gone somewhere. It’s probably just mixed up with other stuff somewhere, but maybe it’s time to deal with the clutter.”

Haruhi was the one who was always collecting random crap like some kind of crow. Nagato had her books, Asahina had her tea utensils, Koizumi had his retro board games, but it was definitely Haruhi who was responsible for the bulk of our miscellaneous junk.

She flopped down in her special brigade chief’s chair.

“I pretty much keep any flyer for any event I happen to get, but I totally forgot about this one.” Haruhi produced a flyer from within her desk. “It’s an ad for a flea market. It’s a little far, but if we get on an express train we can get there in fifteen minutes or so. I’d really wanted to participate right away, but we’re so busy right now, and it seems like the application would take some time to fill out.”

We were only busy because Haruhi decided we were, but whatever.

I took the flyer Haruhi was waving at me and sat in my own chair. A flea market, huh? Given the season, I supposed it would be a way for people to clear out their old inventory.

I glared at the flyer that had inspired Haruhi to decide upon a new destination.

“Here, have some tea.” A full teacup was placed before me on the table.

Ah, Asahina, how magnificent you are! Even dressed as a movie waitress, you’re still considerate enough to serve us tea, your face adorned with a humble smile—it brings a tear to my eye! The waitress outfit is somehow a fresh and novel change from your usual maid clothing, and… Come to think of it, this kind of job is a much better fit for that outfit, since waitresses don’t actually fight space aliens, as a rule.

Asahina giggled. “I actually kind of like this outfit, as long as I don’t have to go out in it. It’s cute.”

Apparently mindful of her short skirt’s length, Asahina kept her legs close together as she trotted happily back, tray in hand, to where the teapot and teacups were stored. There she carefully poured tea for each club member. Though Asahina fans throughout the school might drool at the prospect, the only people in this wide world who were privy to Asahina’s maid duties were the members of the literature club. The same went for Nagato the witch-costumed bookworm. I felt like I should probably take a picture to remember the scene.

Just as I was immersing myself in the task of wetting my parched throat and eyes—

“Hey, Kyon!” Haruhi had polished off her tea in about five seconds, slamming her teacup back down on the desk and jumping suddenly to her feet. She certainly was busy. “Maybe it’s impossible this time, but next time we gotta sell some stuff at that flea market. Before then, go through your house and fish out anything you don’t need that you think will sell for a good price. You’ve got stuff like that, right? A collection of stuff you don’t use anymore but can’t throw away, or a present you never wound up opening.”

I had a complete set of model robots from some anime I’d never seen before that I’d gotten as part of a magazine promotion, back when I was a kid. Something like that? I asked.

“Yeah, that’ll do.” Haruhi snatched the flyer back out of my hand and smoothed it out carefully. “I bet those models would be much happier with somebody better than you to build them.”

Forget about the kiddie-level models, I said; what about the laptops she’d plundered from the computer club? I bet those would sell for real money.

“Those are precious assets! I’ve gotta call the computer club guys over and get ’em upgraded.”

Haruhi next turned the force of her attention to Asahina, who was blowing on the teacup she held in her cupped hands.

“You seem like you’d have all kinds of stuff, Mikuru. Clothes you don’t wear anymore or pointless cooking utensils. You seem like you’re always going shopping.”

“Ah, um…” Asahina turned her lovely eyes up. “I suppose so. I just can’t help buying cute things. But sometimes when I wear them they don’t look good on me or they feel strange… Wait—how did you know?”

“It’s so obvious! Whenever we walk past shops, your eyes light up, like you’re thinking to yourself, ‘I gotta come back here and buy that.’ You radiate waves of it, like a kid wanting a trumpet. I’m surprised you ever have any pocket change left.”

Asahina looked abashed, but Haruhi soon directed her attention elsewhere. “I bet Yuki’s got a lot of books. We could open a used book stall at the flea market, easy. The bookshelves here in the clubroom are already packed tight and all. I swear, they’re about to break through the floor.”

“…” Nagato slowly turned her head to regard Haruhi, then the bookshelves, then finally me, before looking back down at her book.

I seriously doubted that Nagato would be willing to part with her personal library, and anyway it wasn’t that Nagato had a lot of books at her place, it was more like she had nothing but a lot of books at her place.

“So when we do this, Kyon, you take a cart to Yuki’s place. And help her pack up books too.”

Nagato again turned her head to look at me, and I was struck by the message in her eyes—a familiar sensation. When had I felt this before? That's right—the winter break, back when Nakagawa had inflicted that idiotic phone call on me. We were cleaning out the clubroom, and as far as the books overflowing from their shelves went, Nagato had maintained a strict no-comment policy. I very much doubted she would be willing to part with a single book from her home either.

"Yes, well," said Koizumi, teacup in hand, "I did go to the trouble of bringing all these games in, but I've had no luck finding people to play with. It might be good to take this opportunity to scale back my collection a bit."

I wished he would've refrained from aiming his pained grin quite so directly at me.

Haruhi restlessly sat herself down on the brigade chief's desk. "Okay, everybody, make sure you're free on the last day of spring break. We're gonna go check out the flea market. And if we spot anything interesting there, we'll use club funds to buy it!"

It went without saying that those "club funds" belonged not to the SOS Brigade, but to the literature club.

In any case.

Although the school gates were closed during the break, as if to tell the students to relax for a little while, Haruhi made sure the SOS Brigade was not given the luxury of afternoon napping. She dragged us all over the place, and even on the last day of the break, we had to assemble at the station-front rendezvous point.

"So you've finally managed to arrive at that point. I was starting to wonder if it had been erased from your memory."

What good would it do anyone if I'd lost that memory? I asked.

"I can't guess at the possible profit or loss, but if I could erase it, I would very much like to."

That didn't make any sense. I'd never heard anything about Koizumi being able to control memories, and anyway, if he could, then he ought to be doing

something about Haruhi's head.

"You are quite right."

He didn't have to sound so wistful about it, I said. Spending his energy worrying about Haruhi's problems was a waste of a perfectly good life.

"That is not the case. Haruhi's problems are my problems," he said, spreading his arms in a gesture of resignation as I returned to my recollection.

The morning of the flea market, I obeyed the cry of my alarm clock and got out of bed.

And that was the part that was bothering me. Leaving behind a nice warm bed was bad enough, and seeing Shamisen still curled up in the blankets made me want to haul him out too, but I would've felt bad—so I headed downstairs alone.

As soon as I looked into the kitchen—

"Ah, Kyon! Good morning! Where's Shami?" said my sister past a piece of toast she held in her mouth.

I opened the fridge and got out a bottle of barley tea, poured myself a cup, and drank it. "He's sleeping."

"Want me to make you some toast? There's fried egg too."

"Yeah, thanks," I replied, and headed to the bathroom. When I got back, I saw my sister stick a slice of bread into the toaster, then put a plate with ham and eggs on it into the microwave. It wasn't that she was being especially considerate—she just enjoyed using the kitchen appliances.

Incidentally my sister—eleven years old and entering sixth grade the very next day—had been invited over to Miyokichi's house for the entire day, and she wouldn't be returning until the evening. She'd already dressed up for the occasion in her own way and was waiting for the arrival of her friend, who despite being the same age certainly didn't look it.

Regarding Miyokichi—three days earlier, I'd happened to run into her on the street, and although it had not been so very long since I'd last seen her, in that short amount of time she'd become even more beautiful and mature, such that when I imagined her walking around with my sister, I couldn't help but see them

as the “big sister” and “baby girl” in a matched set of dolls. What were they feeding her to make her turn out like that?

But seriously, if Miyokichi were my sister she definitely wouldn’t do stuff like barging into my room and borrowing stuff without permission, and I bet she’d employ a more refined method of waking me up in the morning too. She probably wouldn’t chase a traumatized Shamisen all over the house, and I was starting to wonder more and more why I couldn’t have been born as Miyokichi’s older brother…

“No need to brag about your girlfriend,” Koizumi said flatly as he held up a single cherry blossom petal. “It may be that whoever possesses Miyoko Yoshimura as a younger sister is fortunate. But if you regard things from a different perspective, the view that your own sister has qualities enough to recommend her will also emerge. Nevertheless, could you tell me in more detail about someone else? Tell me what happened once you left the house and proceeded to the rendezvous point.”

He was being a little harsh, I said. Having never himself laid eyes on Miyokichi, it was easy enough for him to be indifferent.

But whatever. If he wanted to know about the last day of the spring break that followed the end of our first year in high school, I’d hurry the story along. But Koizumi himself was a character in that story, so he himself should have known full well what was going to happen.

“I have no interest in myself,” he said, continuing to play with the petal between his fingers. “The person I’m interested in cannot be found there. To be blunt, while I do worry about how I’m perceived through your eyes, in the end it is a triviality.”

He flicked the petal away.

“Do continue.”

As usual, I got on my bike and rode over to the train station.

When it came to excursions, rule number one of the SOS Brigade was that whoever was last to arrive had to treat the other members. This rule was still active, and thus far I had yet to be treated by anyone other than myself. The

possibility that I might yet enjoy a feast with someone else paying the bill—especially if that person were Haruhi—urged my legs on as usual. Yet somehow Haruhi always managed to beat me. It was like that was her true goal, that she was hiding somewhere and watching me, waiting to strike.

As such thoughts occupied my mind, I searched for an empty spot in the bike racks next to the train station when a voice rang out from behind me.

“Heya, Kyon!”

“Wha—”

It was so close it felt like a surprise attack. I mean, the voice was right behind me. I’d been vaguely pushing my bike into the rack, and it was hardly surprising that my legs suddenly propelled me into the air.

I turned around reflexively, and as soon as I saw the voice’s origin, a name rose to my mouth even before it appeared in my mind. “Oh, it’s you, Sasaki.”

“ ‘Oh, it’s you’? What the hell kind of greeting is that? It’s been forever!”

Sasaki also held her bike by the handlebars and had a gentle expression on her face, quite in contrast to her words.

“Hey, come to think of it, Kyon, I was just on the phone with Sudou. Seems he wanted to have some kind of get-together with the people from our third-year junior high class. He didn’t come right out and say it, but given the nuances of the conversation and various other pieces of evidence, I think he’s still carrying a torch for one of the girls in the class. From what I can tell, I’m wondering if it isn’t Okamoto—she got into a girls’ high school. Okamoto as in the one with the curly hair, from the rhythmic gymnastics club. Anyway, he wanted to know if we could do it this summer vacation, and I was thinking that’d be good. I mean, not that it really matters to me. What do you think?”

I thought if they put it together, I’d go. There were several classmates I’d been decent friends with but hadn’t seen since graduation. And since I couldn’t quite remember Okamoto’s face, I’d be happy to leave the seat next to her open for Sudou.

Sasaki’s lips curled into an inscrutable smile. “That’s what I thought you’d say. But Kyon—I suppose I would be one of those good friends you haven’t seen

since graduation, wouldn't I? In fact, the last time I saw you was when we received our diplomas together. It's been a full year."

Sasaki had taken one hand off her bike's handlebars, and she now rotated her palm over to indicate the passage of time.

"You got into North High, right? How is it? Are you having a pleasant high school experience?"

Pleasantness wasn't necessarily related to something's value, but at the very least at the moment it wasn't especially unpleasant. I could almost say it was fun. Although, I said, explaining all the wondrous things I'd experienced during my first year at North High would take some time.

"Well, that's good. I don't have much to talk about. It's not boring, exactly, but there's nothing happening at my school that's violating any laws of physics."

Well, that was a relief. If anything like that were happening at a high school somewhere, it would go right past "fun" and straight on into "national panic."

I fixed my former classmate's face in a firm gaze, trying to determine if anything had changed since junior high. "You went to some fancy private school outside the city, right? The one that gets people into famous colleges."

The hue of Sasaki's smile shifted. "I'm relieved you haven't forgotten all the details. Yes, that's right. Which means I'm going crazy trying to keep up with the classes. Even today"—she said, pointing in the direction of the train station—"I've gotta get to cram school. On a train. It's seriously like I'm studying just to study more. Doesn't feel like I got a spring break at all. And tomorrow an even longer train ride to school is waiting for me. I haven't gotten used to riding a packed train, nor do I really want to."

It was a decent challenger to the steep hike up the hill to get to North High, I said.

"At least that's good exercise. I should've gone to a city school. I'm jealous of Sudou." I had no idea what was so funny, but Sasaki suddenly chuckled in a way I couldn't possibly imitate. "By the way, Kyon, what brings you to the local private rail line today? If we'll be boarding the same train, we've got more catching up to do, and I wouldn't mind sitting with you."

I checked my watch. Crap. Only three minutes to go until the rendezvous.

“Sorry, Sasaki, I’ve got to meet up with my cohorts. One of them’s really picky about punctuality, and if I’m late there’s no telling what’ll happen to me.”

“Cohorts? From school? Huh, how ’bout that. Well, I’d better hurry up and park my bike, then. Oh, don’t worry—since I lock it up here every morning, I’ve got a monthly pass to a parking area. As for where it is—”

Sasaki placed her bike into an open space in a nearby bicycle parking area, locking it up and then peering at me.

“—it’s right here. Kyon, would you mind terribly if I came with you to meet your companions? Any friend of yours is a friend of mine, after all. I’d very much like to see their faces.”

She’d receive no benefit for paying her respects, but if Sasaki wanted to meet them, I didn’t mind. Introducing her to them wouldn’t bring anything positive into her life, but I always felt a little bit of pride in showing off the lovely Asahina, even though that didn’t have anything to do with my own achievements.

I looked for an open space in the bike parking area, then parked my bike and paid for the spot, while Sasaki followed me, bag over her shoulder. As we walked we chatted about junior high, but just as the SOS Brigade’s official meeting spot in front of the station came into view—

“Kyon, you haven’t changed at all,” Sasaki murmured.

“I haven’t?”

“Nope. It’s a relief.”

Why would Sasaki be relieved? She hadn’t changed a bit herself, I pointed out.

“If so, then I haven’t matured a bit. If my physical measurements are to be believed, there should be at least some change.”

Okay, sure, I’d gotten a little taller too.

“Sorry, that’s not what I meant. You can change your appearance if you want to. Even something as simple as growing or cutting your hair can make a pretty big difference in impressions. What you can’t change is what’s inside—either for the better or for the worse. If human consciousness is material in nature, then

without changing the medium there won't be much change in patterns of thinking or perception."

This was strangely nostalgic. I remembered now—back in junior high, Sasaki was always going on about obscure stuff like this.

"At least," she continued as we walked, "so long as there's no St. Paul–like change in direction or no Copernican revolution. Changes in the world equal changes in ideology. You could say that's all there is, because humans can't understand any phenomena whose cognitive ability exceeds their own. Our eyes can't see infrared radiation, but snakes have heat-sensitive vision. When the frequency of sound rises above a certain level, our ears can't hear it, but dogs can hear into ultrasonic ranges. While neither of them is detectable to humans, both infrared rays and ultrasonic sounds do exist. We merely cannot perceive them."

Man, I wish you'd come to North High, Sasaki. I know a guy who sounds just like you. Lucky for us, he will be at the meeting spot we're headed to, I said, so shall I introduce you to each other?

As I made the proposal, the forms of every SOS Brigade member—save myself—came into view a short distance ahead of us.

"You certainly did bring a singular individual along with you," said Koizumi, diluting the shade of criticism that had colored his speech a bit. "In a way, she would've made a good counterpart to me. But in essence, I'm nowhere near her level. Our positions are too different. Since I know my own limits, there are quite a few people whose viewpoints I envy. You would be one of them, in fact."

He could flatter me all he wanted—not unlike a priestess of Delphi, I would not convey his words to the Oracle.

"Oh, I know. There is nothing so terrifying as an act of God—something you can see and hear but can do nothing to control."

Anyway, *I* knew that Sasaki was a force to be reckoned with, since I'd gone through my last year of junior high with her, but how did Koizumi know that? I wanted to know.

"It's hardly surprising. Surely you must know that the Agency has thoroughly

investigated you. We've gone through most everything in your life. And the conclusion is that you are an entirely normal individual."

Gosh, thanks. So I had a Certificate of Normalcy from his organization, huh?

"If you wanted one, I could arrange it. Sorry, that was a joke. What isn't a joke is how I felt once I learned that you attended junior high with Sasaki and were even close friends."

And why is that? I wondered.

Koizumi continued as though reciting poetry. "Because while she appears to be a normal person, when viewed another way, your friend Sasaki may be something quite different. She may seem like a particle but accomplish the work of a wave. Just like light."

I didn't know anything about acts of God. I was tired of hearing the word "coincidence." To say nothing of things like the dual nature of light, which I hoped never to concern myself with.

In any case, Sasaki and I continued on toward the station, stopping at the spot that had become the club's usual meeting place.

It was a familiar area, and four familiar faces greeted me. Three of them were wearing casual clothes; the fourth was in a school uniform.

And then there were the words from the brigade chief I so longed to hear.

"You've got some guts being late. I've told you over and over, but not only are you the last to arrive, but you're actually late! Is the spring weather making you lazy? Kyon, you've gotta treasure every single second. Your time does not belong only to you. It's equal to the time you've kept all of us waiting, so I'm gonna add a penalty charge to make up for the lost time. We can't do anything about the time that's passed, but at least it will cheer us up a little bit."

Haruhi finished her spiel, took a deep breath, and regarded strangely the person standing next to me.

"What's that?"

"Oh, this is my—" I started to introduce Sasaki.

"Close friend," interrupted Sasaki, finishing my answer.

“Huh?” Haruhi’s eyes widened, and Sasaki shook her head slightly and explained.

“From junior high, I should say. Just third year, though. Maybe that’s why he’s been so stingy about keeping in touch. I guess that goes both ways, though, but I think if you can have a conversation with someone without many pleasantries at all, that counts as a close friend. As far as I’m concerned, Kyon, that’s what you are.”

I supposed that was what a friend you were close to amounted to. I hung out with her quite a bit, and of the friends I hung out with after school, she was probably the one I spent the most time with, I thought. But—

I was getting a bad feeling about this for some reason. Let me just say that I have no memory of ever doing anything that would be cause for gossip, because I did no such thing. But for some reason when Sasaki stood next to me and claimed to be my close friend, the strange expression on Haruhi’s face made me feel like I’d gone outside without an umbrella despite an impending thunderstorm. Why was that?

When I thought back, I realized that the frequency of Asahina’s blinking rose, and I seemed to recall Koizumi making a thoughtful expression and putting his finger to his chin. I don’t remember any change in Nagato’s silent uniform-clad form, but I was really only looking at Haruhi’s face at the time.

I sensed movement beside me, and Sasaki took a half step forward, her mouth curved into a crescent moon of a smile as she extended a hand to Haruhi. As if trying to shake her hand.

“I’m Sasaki. And you’re Suzumiya, I presume. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Haruhi’s eyes flicked toward me, as though she’d been falsely charged with some crime.

“I didn’t say anything about your evil deeds! Sasaki, why do you know about Haruhi?”

“Because I live in the same city she does, and rumors about interesting people get around. You’re not the only person from our junior high who went on to North High, Kyon.”

Oh, right—Kunikida, I said.

“Him, too, yes. How’s he doing? Taking it easy as always, I’ll bet. He could’ve gone to a tougher high school, but that weirdo went out of his way to get into a so-so public school.” Having offered her comment on her fellow alumnus, Sasaki regarded Haruhi once again. “I hear Kyon’s been under your care quite a bit at North High. Thanks again.”

Sasaki’s proffered hand remained extended, and she smiled pleasantly.

Faced with Sasaki’s Western-style greeting, Haruhi at first looked like she’d put a piece of chocolate in her mouth only to discover it was a pebble, but she soon accepted the hand.

“Sure,” she said, gripping Sasaki’s hand and looking her straight in the eye. “I guess I don’t have to introduce myself, then.”

“I guess not.” Sasaki returned Haruhi’s gaze with a smile, then laughed like a tree frog making the first croak of its life. “So who are your friends?” Sasaki reluctantly let go of Haruhi’s hand and looked over the group.

Perhaps realizing that introducing the brigade members was the chief’s duty, Haruhi rapidly did so. “The cute one there is Mikuru; the one in the school uniform is Yuki. This is Koizumi,” she said, pointing to each one in turn.

“O-oh, hello, I’m Mikuru Asahina.” Wearing a cheerful spring ensemble that would no doubt fly off the shelves if an Asahina brand were ever launched, the brigade’s sole upperclassman stiffened and hung on to her purse, reintroducing herself.

“I’m Koizumi,” said the assistant brigade chief, with a pleasant courtesy that made me wonder if he’d been studying under Arakawa.

“…” Nagato, wearing her uniform as though she were still at school, did not move a muscle.

After hearing each of the trio’s different responses, Sasaki skipped the handshake—maybe it would’ve been too much trouble—and simply said, “Nice to meet you,” gazing at them amusedly.

Asahina fidgeted slightly, Koizumi returned to his usual serene smile, and

Nagato observed Sasaki with her eyes like pools of water ladled up from the deep ocean.

Sasaki paused for a moment as though carving their names and faces into her memory, but then turned to me.

“Well then, Kyon, I’ve got to catch my train, so you’ll have to excuse me. I’ll drop you a line later. See you!”

She gave a quick little wave, smiled again to Haruhi, then strode off toward the turnstiles.

She was rather brisk about everything. I was vaguely stunned, and watched her go until she disappeared.

Although we hadn’t seen each other in quite some time, we hadn’t had much of a conversation. At this rate it would be another year before we met again.

After a few seconds of silence, Haruhi spoke. “She was a bit odd.”

For Haruhi to think someone was odd, they had to be seriously weird, I said.

Haruhi turned her gaze away from the turnstile gates. “So your friend—has she always been like that?”

“Yeah. She hasn’t changed a bit, outside or in.”

“Huh.” Haruhi cocked her head slightly, as though trying to pour whatever thought she was having out through one ear. But she soon gave it up, righted her head, and spun around with a little hop. “Well, whatever. Anyway, Kyon, we’re going to the café. Your treat. You better have brought extra money. If there are any treasures to be had at the flea market, we gotta buy ’em!”

Haruhi smiled like a fluorescent light display at an appliance store and took up the lead as she began to walk.

Geez. I guess I didn’t mind having to carry her stuff around, but couldn’t she at least use her own money to buy whatever crap she wanted? I’d have to keep an eye out for Nagato’s sake, lest Haruhi lay a hand on the literature club’s budget.

“As for what happened later,” I said to Koizumi, “you know the rest. We went to the café and I paid the tab, then we headed to the flea market where Haruhi bought a whole pile of crap we don’t need, then we headed back to that fancy

little ocean view place for lunch, stopping by Sakanaka's house on the way."

Koizumi better not tell me that just because he carried around a go board he bought from an old couple at the market, he'd forgotten that it was me who'd lugged most of our stuff around all day. I'd wound up hauling our "bargains"—like desert rose mineral samples—all over the event grounds. The only good parts were Asahina looking through a kaleidoscope that looked like it was made by a little kid and exclaiming, "Wow, such a primitive toy! It's lovely!" and Nagato staring intently at a random tribal mask that seemed perfect for a sorcerer.

"Is your memory of things any different?"

"Fortunately, it seems not," said Koizumi, looking carefully at the back of the monitor. "As far as the objective events go, your explanation is quite correct. However, regarded subjectively, your interpretation and mine have some serious inconsistencies."

Koizumi gave me an appraising look. I didn't like it at all.

"Here, then, is the question. Earlier I told you that incidents of closed space were on the rise. To be accurate, it's at about the level it was when Suzumiya started high school. The amount at which I was called upon to perform my 'job' had been decreasing last year and on into this one, but it suddenly returned to its former level right after spring break. Why do you suppose that is?"

I fidgeted. "What're you trying to say?"

"I don't want to have to come right out and say it, but some things cannot be conveyed otherwise. In fact, times when wordless communication suffices to transmit an idea are quite rare. There is a causal relationship. In this case, the cause can be traced back to a significant event on the last day of spring break. The effect is clear: closed space and <Celestials>. So what does this mean? That is my question to you."

"…"

I sank into a Nagato-like silence. The back of my head itched.

Koizumi wore a smile like a mask excavated from a Jomon-era archaeological dig, an expression that couldn't be described as anything other than a smile.

“Since Suzumiya began creating closed space at the same time the new semester started, we can conclude that whatever the problem is, it began at the end of spring break. When we consider what happened that day, it seems to have been typical SOS Brigade activities, with nothing especially momentous happening. We simply enjoyed ourselves at the flea market. There was only a single irregular element that interrupted our routine. I’m quite sure you’ve already realized what that was.”

Sasaki.

“But why?” I said. “I just happened to come to the meeting spot with a classmate from junior high. Why would that have anything to do with Haruhi’s stress levels?”

Koizumi closed his mouth as though surprised and regarded me more triumphantly than searchingly, just like Shamisen watching a cicada brought home for him by my sister. He did this for a full ten seconds.

I was considering waving my hand in front of his face to check for consciousness when the harmlessly handsome esper slowly and heartily shook his head.

“If you must know,” he said exaggeratedly, “this girl Sasaki, who proclaimed herself to be your good friend, is such an attractive girl that she’d probably catch the eye of eight out of ten guys!”

Koizumi’s voice sounded like a grand vizier who’d decided to assassinate the king.

It was two years earlier, around this time of year.

It was the spring I’d entered the third and final year of middle school, and I had been forced to attend cram school by my mom, who feared for my high school future.

Sasaki was in the same class and was the only one there who also wound up in the same classroom as me in school—what’s more, our desks were even pretty close. That’s how we wound up talking, without either of us really being the one to initiate it, if I remember right. I’m not sure, but it was something like, “Oh, hey, you go here too?”

That was the trigger, and it got so we'd chat sometimes in the classroom.

I didn't pay much attention to it, but I soon noticed that she had a certain stiff formality to her speech that she only ever used when she was talking to boys. When she was with other girls, she talked the same way they did.

I wondered if there was a reason for that. Perhaps her use of masculine language was because she didn't want to be seen as "just" a girl—it was a signal not to view her as a romantic object. Maybe I was overthinking this.

Of course it didn't matter to me, so I didn't give her any trouble about it. For one thing, I didn't have so much confidence in my own grammatical usage that I felt qualified to critique others'.

Sasaki was interested in my name.

"Kyon is a rather unique nickname. How'd you get it?"

I reluctantly explained the episode behind it, and my younger sister's antics.

"How about that. So what's your actual name?"

I gave her its pronunciation, at which Sasaki tilted her head and eyes in different directions.

"And you get 'Kyon' from that? What kanji could possibly—wait, no, don't tell me. I want to try and figure it out."

Sasaki was quiet for a while, then snickered to herself.

"It's probably something like this, I bet."

Her mechanical pencil scratched on her notebook paper. I looked at the characters that appeared and felt genuinely impressed. She'd correctly written my given name.

"Can I ask how you got it? There's got to be a reason for such a grand, majestic name."

I repeated the reason my dad had given me when I'd asked him the same question as a kid.

"Hey, that's nice."

When Sasaki said it, it made me feel like I actually did have a good name.

“Gotta say, though, I like ‘Kyon’ better. It’s got a nice ring to it. Is it cool if I call you that? Or should I propose a different moniker? Seems like you’re not a huge fan of your nickname.”

How did Sasaki know I didn’t like my nickname? I wanted to know.

“Because you respond more quickly when called by your real name than by your nickname. About point two seconds quicker.”

That was because the only time people called me by my real name was when they had serious business with me. Like when a teacher called on me in class to answer a question or when someone who didn’t know me well—especially a girl—talked to me… and anyway, I asked, point two seconds? How could she even tell the difference?

“That’s about how long it takes for your brain to process information and take action. When someone uses your name, you respond instantly. But when someone calls you ‘Kyon,’ you’re that much slower, perhaps because of some deep-seated psychological reason. It made me wonder if subconsciously you really don’t like the name.”

Thinking back, I’m pretty sure I’d never been subjected to so much psychobabble in my life.

Cram school classes happened three times a week, on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, and always in the evenings.

Not counting the Saturdays on which there was no school, I got accustomed to making the trip on Tuesday and Thursday with Sasaki. The cram school was near the biggest train station in the area, and to walk there from our middle school, the tedium of traversing the distance would’ve bored us to death. The bus route was circuitous and lengthy. The quickest way to get there was to ride directly there by bike, which took a mere fifteen minutes.

My house was along the direct route from school to the cram school, so the most logical plan was to get the bike out upon returning home and pedal to the cram school. And since Sasaki was already with me, it became habit for me to have her ride on the back. It saved her the bus fare, for which she was grateful.

Though we were in the same classroom at cram school, it wasn’t as though we

had free time every day for pointless chatting. The surrounding atmosphere ensured we both studied seriously. That might have been why the gently decreasing curve of my grades during my second year of middle school started to come back up, which I was thankful for—and it certainly provided some relief to my mother, whose dismay at the grand countdown that had been my grades had prompted her to take serious action and toss me into cram school.

It would've been even better if it had gotten her to stop saying stuff like, "If you don't improve your grades more, you'll never be able to go to the same college as Sasaki." I didn't understand why I had to go to the same college as her.

Once class at the cram school was out, the world had fallen into night. I'd look up at the celestial zits that were Earth's natural satellites as I pushed my bike home, Sasaki following just slightly behind me. We'd walk to the nearest bus stop, since she took the bus the rest of the way home.

“See you tomorrow at school, Kyon,” she would say as she stepped into the bus, and then I would ride straight home.

Okay, enough reflection.

“I can hardly believe you’d already progressed so far,” said Koizumi, his middle finger pressed to his brow. “It’s like a page out of an innocent middle school love story.”

He could say that if he wanted to, but Sasaki and I didn’t have anything like that kind of pleasant boy-girl relationship. For it to be “pleasant,” it would’ve had to exist in the first place, I pointed out.

“Oh, certainly. If that’s what you think, I’m sure that it’s true. But I wonder about the people around you. What did they make of the pair of you, do you suppose?”

I was starting to get a bad feeling about this. Now that he mentioned it, Kunikida and Nakagawa had both gotten the wrong idea about it…

“I’d probably get the wrong idea about it too, if I’d heard the situation from someone else. And I’m certainly not the only person who’d think so. It’s entirely possible that Asahina and Nagato are thinking likewise. But both of them have some knowledge of your circumstances, so it would probably remain an empty concern on their part, but I can think of one person who’s supremely unlikely to let this slide.”

“… And who’s that?”

Koizumi’s smile took a turn for the malicious. Something in his eyes looked distinctly critical of me. “If we’ve gotten this far and you still don’t know, then we may have to cut your head open and write the name directly on your brain.”

I knew whom he was talking about. “Can’t really believe it, though.” I felt strange, as though there was a large mass of caterpillars on top of my head. “So Haruhi saw Sasaki, heard her refer to herself as my close friend, then got all fuzzy-headed for some reason? Is this her subconscious again?”

“You’re familiar with the concepts of closed space and <Celestials>, but of late their behavior has changed. Closed space is as it always was, but the <Celestials>

have been so placid it's unsettling. Though they still appear, where they would usually be actively destructive, they're now listless, at loose ends. Only occasionally do they bother striking a building, as though suddenly remembering what they're supposed to do."

So those blue monsters were finally acting rationally. What was the downside? I asked.

"As far as we in the Agency are concerned, it matters little. We must destroy the <Celestials> to eliminate closed space." Koizumi continued: "We have to conclude that the <Celestials>—and consequently, Suzumiya's subconscious—are at a loss. It's as though she doesn't even know what she's thinking or what she should be thinking. Her subconscious is wandering, lost."

Freud would laugh in his grave. I'm sure he never imagined his theories would be used so frequently to analyze someone like Haruhi.

"For my part, it seems quickest to assume that Suzumiya is feeling some jealousy toward Sasaki."

I was gonna have to object to that statement—if for no one's sake but Haruhi's. "She's the kind of girl who thinks of romance as a mental illness, you know."

"So let me ask you this: do you think Suzumiya is such a keen psychological observer that she's an authority on the various ways men and women relate to each other?"

Not even remotely, I said.

"Nor do I. She may seem to understand, but she often does not in fact understand. In any case, her heart is no more mature than other girls of her age. From that perspective at least, she is a normal girl. She just assumes rather contrary positions at times."

You're one to talk, I told him. Koizumi had no shortage of contrarianism in him.

"You think so?" Koizumi smiled as though having removed a mask, then put his finger to his cheek theatrically. "I must not be making enough effort, for you to so easily see through me." He spread his hands and shook his head. "To analyze the situation, I would say that Suzumiya has discovered that you have a friend

from your past who she never knew about and couldn't have even imagined up to this point, and it's causing her to feel things she has trouble articulating. The word 'jealousy' is an oversimplification—it's a more basic, fundamental emotion. Let's call it 'surprise.' Of course you have one or two old friends, and maybe even a girl among those—even Suzumiya understands that much. But for Sasaki to refer to you as her 'close friend,' well, nobody would expect that. Not even me, who already knew of her existence."

"I don't really get it… No, I don't get it at all, in fact."

"During middle school, Suzumiya was mostly isolated, or perhaps even lonely, so hearing the words 'good friend' may have caused her to feel a certain pang."

"But that's what she wanted. She's so aloof."

"And yet still. For example, suppose I had a friend of the opposite sex you knew nothing about, and she suddenly appeared. What would you think?"

"What, do you?" I pushed. It wouldn't surprise me at all if this guy turned out to have had a secret girlfriend all along.

Koizumi smiled, chagrined. "Perhaps that was a bad example. Let's not talk about me. What if Asahina had a male friend from her past who was acting overly familiar toward her?"

It would bug me, of course, but—"That'd never happen. Asahina and Nagato did not come to this world to play around."

Honestly, it wouldn't kill either of them to play around a little more. And anyway, Asahina's past was our future.

"This is merely hypothetical. If there were such a situation, how would you feel? I am only guessing, but I'll bet you'd feel a strange emotion, difficult to put into words. Neither jealousy nor uneasiness. For one thing, Asahina has never appeared particularly aware of the fact that her friend is of the opposite sex, and on the surface seems the same as she's always been. So being suspicious of her friend is ridiculous. Thus, erasing these feelings from your subconscious is the best course of action. Now consider this situation, but replace Asahina with you, and you with Suzumiya."

Across the courtyard, a small cheer went up. Evidently a new freshman had

decided to join one of the clubs.

Koizumi looked up. “But elements outside our ordinary consciousness are not so easily changed. Thus her unconscious frustration gives rise to closed space and these sluggish <Celestials>. While the root cause may seem clear, it is in fact not so, which is why there is no obvious means to counter it. Although such means may yet exist—” His eyes got narrower still.

“Kyon! Koizumi!” Haruhi strode toward us with heavy footsteps, as though she were trying to break the cobblestones of the courtyard, her body pressed against Asahina’s.

“Wah, whaaaah—!” Asahina’s feet got tangled, owing to Haruhi’s half-again-as-long stride, but Haruhi ignored this and dragged her along like so much captured prey.

I figured she’d bring back some unlucky lemming of a freshman, but much to my surprise, she was empty-handed. So the tag team of maid and Chinese dress hadn’t hooked a single one, eh? It looked like this year’s crop of freshmen was full up on common sense.

Haruhi stopped in front of the monitor that was looping the trailer. “Have there been any interesting applicants? What about with you, Yuki?” she said, still holding on to Asahina.

As I was deep in thought, I got the sense that Nagato shook her head minutely.

“We walked all over the place, but it was totally no good. The guys who started leering at the mention of being able to drink as much of Asahina’s tea as they wanted were obviously disqualified. Whenever we went up to girls, they just ran away, so I guess this year’s just a bad crop.”

Or maybe they’d been mistaken for the cosplay club.

“But I’m sure there’s at least one suitable person somewhere; we just haven’t found him or her yet. Not *yet*. Kyon! In middle school, did you know any interesting students younger than you? There definitely weren’t any in my school, so anybody from East Central is out. I forgot to mention that until now,” said Haruhi loudly. Her face—

—Her face was shining with a brilliance like the nuclear fusion of a triple star

system.

I don’t think it could’ve gotten any brighter.

We strolled back to the room with no results to show for the day’s efforts.

Asahina looked relieved as she straightened her posture and, still in her maid outfit, set about putting the kettle on the portable burner and preparing to make tea. Koizumi and I set about putting away and replacing the tables and cables.

Nagato, being Nagato, crumpled up the literature club flyers and tossed them into the trash bin like so many used tissues, then carefully put the club newsletter sample back on the shelf as though it was some sort of treasure. She then sat mechanically in the corner of the clubroom and opened a hardcover book. Though she was a moderate distance away, I couldn’t imagine she hadn’t heard the conversation between Koizumi and me, but she had the same mutely cool expression and demeanor that she’d had a year ago, which for some reason made me feel better.

Haruhi sat at her desk and rested a finger atop the point of her pyramidal “Brigade Chief” plaque, rattling it around. “There just weren’t any freshmen with a spark. Maybe we’ve gotta expand our search area. All the real talent’s probably going to the athletic clubs. They’re not going to come to us if we just wait. It’s always better to cast your net more, and in a bigger sea.”

Her legs emerging from the Chinese dress, Haruhi wore an impish expression, like a clever child deciding on her next prank. She was excited.

For my part, I thought you’d catch better fish by using a pole than by dredging with a net, but I had no intention of sharing my ideas and thereby being complicit in her plan to entice new members.

“I’m not gonna let the big fish get away either. In fact, I’m thinking of having a look around all the other clubs, like I did last year. I definitely want to stop them from snatching away potential members. With so many students, as least one of them has to be tasty.”

And just what flavor of freshman did she want? I asked. One we could cook and eat would be nice.

“Someone cuter than Mikuru, more obedient than Yuki, and politer than Koizumi—someone like that.”

That was a heck of a hurdle. For one thing, Asahina was the only member she’d had a good reason for bringing in. Statements like “glasses are a turn-on” aside, Nagato was only here as a bonus, since she’d been in the literature club when we took over the room, and Haruhi’s only attraction to Koizumi was because he was a transfer student. I hoped she wasn’t planning on snagging the next student to transfer in around May, I said.

“Our transfer student spot’s already filled by Koizumi, so we don’t need any more. He’s a great lieutenant brigade chief, and we don’t need another character like him. It’s gotta be someone more interesting. The SOS Brigade admits only a select few.” Haruhi booted up the computer and clicked the mouse, her chin cupped in one hand. “I was careless.”

Her carelessness was not a new development.

“Last year we should’ve gone to all the middle schools in the district and recruited promising students early. It’d be a shame if all the best potential members went to other schools. Maybe we should start a satellite brigade in another school. Or establish a prep brigade in a middle school.”

Haruhi’s fancies flew free. I sighed. “Why do you care whether we get more members? Are you trying to field a football team?”

“My SOS Brigade has to go worldwide. Isn’t computer memory increasing all the time? Our goal is the globe! We’ve got to advance along with the rest of the globalizing world!”

So first was computerization, then globalization? I was rather fond of my quiet life. I was a high school student with no special status at all. I knew my place, and I had no intention of trying to shake up the world.

For her part, Haruhi should just start her own school, set herself up as principal, and call it the SOS Academy. She could force every student to join the SOS Brigade. Although now that I thought about it, that was horrifying.

“Ha ha! You’re so stupid, Kyon. I don’t want to set up a corporation,” said Haruhi, laughing it off. “We’re not doing this as a commercial venture!”

Perhaps this was progress. She was talking big, but the Haruhi of last year would've forced people to attend an explanatory lecture about the brigade, printed huge numbers of flyers, and foisted them off on absolutely everybody. Maybe it was the glare of the student council president, but this year she seemed to be taking a more underground resistance–style approach.

It seemed she didn't have any interest in founding new branches or recruiting just anyone into the main brigade. If I had to guess, I'd say she was hoping for someone to come along with some kind of mysterious phenomenon—someone who'd been abducted by aliens, or a time jumper from the future who'd suddenly woken up in the past, or a superpowered human battling evil from another dimension—something like that.

Those were tales I'd once wanted to hear myself.

Now I had no use for them.

I thought about it as I played go with Koizumi, wetting my throat with Asahina's tea, glancing at a straight-backed Nagato reading her book.

The SOS Brigade couldn't get any bigger, I thought.

Even if people like our honorable adviser Tsuruya showed up, or we got more clients like Sakanaka, or we even wound up messing around with more people like we did with the computer club, it didn't seem like anyone other than the five of us could start hanging out in the clubroom the way we did.

That was just my guess, though. I didn't have any reason for it, and the only people who'd be able to explain why my subconscious had settled on that conclusion were the late Doctors Freud and Jung.

As it would turn out, my premonition was half right and half wrong. The clichéd old phrase "Little did I know" applies.

Nobody could've guessed how much of a problem was going to develop. Not Koizumi, probably not Nagato, and perhaps not even Asahina the Elder.

And as for the person responsible, well, who else could it be?

It was Haruhi Suzumiya.

CHAPTER 1

The next day was Friday.

Ever since she was a freshman, Haruhi's habit was to leave the classroom during breaks, and despite the new school year, this did not change—so when fourth period ended, our fearless brigade chief bolted out of the room, and I was left to eat lunch with the usual combination of Taniguchi and Kunikida.

Never mind Taniguchi—when I saw Kunikida's guileless face, it reminded me of Sasaki, who I'd seen a few days earlier. Despite my efforts to the contrary, he noticed me looking.

"What's up? Do you care that much about eel omelets?" asked Kunikida easily, just as Sasaki would've done.

"No, it's nothing," I hastily replied. "I was just thinking I'm surprised we all wound up in the same class."

"Yeah, really." Kunikida stopped pushing his condiments around and looked up. "I'm really happy about it. When I first saw the class sheet, I could hardly believe it."

I'd naturally thought he'd wind up in the science track, I said.

"That was my plan. But I'm a little weak in the humanities, so I thought I'd emphasize that for a year. I'll hit the sciences my senior year. Plus, this year they're only vaguely separated. And there are more electives, so moving from class to class takes a lot of time and trouble. And it's even worse in the second semester."

As far as Taniguchi went… eh, who cares?

"It's too damn cruel, Kyon, buddy!" came Taniguchi's objection. "I wanted to get into a class with prettier girls. I was aiming for class six, but…" He casually glanced over the girls in the room. "I guess this isn't much change. Can't believe I

wound up with you guys again.”

He was just as vulgar as ever; there was something pure about that. Hell, why not? Just like last year, once midterm exams came, we could fly low, just above the red line, I told him.

“That’s a promise. I ain’t gonna let that scrap of paper change my life one bit. Count on it.”

He thumped his chest and talked a good line, but I wondered if this was really okay. At the very least, Taniguchi’s existence was not enough to dismiss my mom’s complaints. If only he had some special talent for making the case that school grades were a trivial measure of worth.

“I still can’t believe I’m in the same class as Suzumiya five years running. What rotten luck,” said Taniguchi innocently. But—it did seem very strange. I knew all too well that too-perfect coincidences often had a reason behind them.

Koizumi and I both cocked our heads, although for different reasons. Then, Kunikida spoke up.

“When you’ve got thirty people in a group, the odds are actually better than fifty-fifty that two of them will share a birthday. So maybe it’s not actually that strange,” he said.

I kind of understood and kind of didn’t, I told him.

“Well, want to do the math?”

I didn’t, not particularly. I got my fill of staring at figures and equations in math class. No, he didn’t have to do it in his head either. I didn’t want to compare brainpower. Taking on pointless challenges without any preparation was Haruhi’s specialty, not mine. The only challenge I could participate in with any confidence would be predicting who’s going to wind up sitting behind me when we change seats.

The seat behind me was currently empty, its occupant doing exactly what she did last year, which was to vacate it during lunch. I was sure she was peeping in on the new freshmen’s classrooms. I wondered if anybody thought it was strange.

No doubt if there were even one person who sparked her interest a bit, she'd go charging right into their classroom. I offered silent prayers that any new student unlucky enough to be pounced upon by a bizarre upperclassman wouldn't head straight for the principal's office. Not knowing which god or Buddha was responsible for such things, I couldn't leave any offerings, but in any case, they seemed to have heard my prayers, because just as fifth period started, Haruhi returned, her eyes notably not sparkling.

"Catch anything?" I asked.

"Nothing." Her answering tone was not so much dejected as it was matter-of-fact. It was like she'd confirmed that the neighborhood pond did not contain any arowana.

After school, I headed for the clubroom with Haruhi, which came as naturally as breathing.

Having advanced a year, we were now in a different school building, and the clubroom was thus closer, although still not what I would call convenient.

"I think it's convenient," said Haruhi, swinging her school bag energetically. "The cafeteria and store are closer. Getting a seat in the cafeteria during lunch is pretty hard. I'm always wondering why they don't add more seats."

She should take stuff like that to the student council president. If she got some signatures together and brought them to him, the school might actually do something about it, I said.

"I don't want to owe that jerk a favor," Haruhi said, quickening her stride and looking away as though suddenly shy. "It's better not to get help from the forces of evil. I hate people who start taking advantage of you once you owe them. I'll do something about it on my own power."

If she started expanding the cafeteria without permission, it wouldn't go well. The literature club's budget wasn't going to cover construction costs.

"If I were going to do it, I wouldn't ask. Everybody would be happy."

Maybe, but I hoped she'd give it a miss. Worst case, we'd make the papers. The next time I saw Tsuruya, I'd have to warn her ahead of time, so that Haruhi couldn't go to her for sponsorship. Of course, a levelheaded person of Tsuruya's

weighty qualifications probably wouldn't take Haruhi's proposals at face value, but just in case.

"So, Haruhi, spot any promising new students?" I said, trying to get her attention away from structural changes to the cafeteria.

"Huh?" She went right for the subject change, but still pierced me with a sharp gaze. "I didn't think you cared. Surprise, surprise. I figured you'd complain about any additions, but I guess even you want an underclassman."

I did not. Of course, it would be nice if there were a member I outranked, since then I could just pass along all the menial jobs Haruhi assigned to me. With Koizumi as lieutenant brigade chief, Asahina as mascot/secretary/assistant chief, and Nagato, somehow, as literature club president, I was the only member of the brigade without an official role, I said.

"What, you want a title that badly? Fine, I'll think of one. But you're gonna have to take a qualification exam. Five written and two practical."

Forget about it, then. All I wanted was a motor vehicle license.

"There's a difference between positivity and just giving up. If you stuck to it a little I might give you something."

If it were something like an armband that said BRIGADE MEMBER #1 on it, I'd pass. That was pretty much the same as FIRST UNDERLING, I said.

"Heh, you noticed?" As Haruhi smiled at me mischievously, we arrived at the door to the clubroom.

It was Haruhi's habit to open the door without bothering to knock and walk right in like it was her own room, but in case Asahina happened to be in the middle of changing clothes, I immediately turned around, then made sure it was safe to enter by checking through the door's gap, so nobody could criticize me.

"…"

Nagato was the only one there.

She sat at the corner of the table in her beloved folding chair, quietly reading the memoir of a mathematician. No matter how quickly we came, she always seemed to be here first. Did she never draw cleaning duty? It was possible.

Haruhi tossed her bag onto the table, then sat down at the brigade chief's desk and pushed the power button on the computer. I left my bag next to Haruhi's and parked my butt in the seat that had somehow become my usual one.

As I listened to the computer's hard drive crunch away, I stared at the beat-up go board we'd left on the table yesterday. It was an unfinished game. The mosaic of black and white pieces was on the verge of completion. If played through, black was going to win by three and a half pieces. Even I could tell that, so it had to be a pretty amateur-level go problem.

"Kyon, tea."

Just wait until Asahina came, I said. It wasn't an overstatement to say that her skill with tea was on par with that of legendary tea master Oribe Furuta, if he got reincarnated somehow.

"No, that is an overstatement. What're you thinking—this isn't tea ceremony. Although I guess she'd be certifiable as the founder of the Asahina School of Tea. Sounds like a cult."

Haruhi's eyes scanned the screen. She pulled the keyboard toward her and started typing something. I wondered what she was composing.

"Come to think of it, you were doing that yesterday too. What're you typing? An updated journal page for the site?" I asked.

"It's a secret. A classified composition. If it leaked out of the brigade, there'd be big trouble. And if it gets out, I'm blaming you." She grinned and continued her skillful typing. She was pretty good at it.

I shrugged, then wandered over to the refrigerator and got a bottle of oolong tea out. I poured some into my own cup, then gave some to Nagato and Haruhi.

Nagato didn't look at the cup I put in front of her, while Haruhi snatched hers out of my hand and drained it in one go. I stole a glance at the computer. It looked like there was a new word processing document open on the screen.

"Another flyer?"

"Wrong," said Haruhi, thrusting her empty teacup at me. "This is in case something goes wrong. It's like a pop quiz. Don't give me that look. I'm not

gonna make you take it.”

So whom was it a test for? I asked.

“Does it matter? Don’t look. It makes it harder to write.” Haruhi covered the screen, so I retreated to my seat.

I nursed my cold oolong tea, and with nothing better to do, played pieces on the go board, and shortly Koizumi arrived. When I saw his face it made me feel a little better—though it pains me to admit it, it’s what I felt. I’d been starting to wonder if he was going to use his “job” as an excuse to miss the club entirely. Plus, playing games by myself was boring.

“Homeroom ran long,” he explained needlessly, closing the door behind him. He looked down at the board, faintly pleased. “I don’t see any plays left. I resign.”

His standard smile. It might have been forced, since Haruhi was there, but it looked normal to me. Koizumi sat across from me, taking the pieces off of the go board and placing them back in their container. “How about a match?”

Sure, why not. But it better be a handicap match. It wasn’t much fun beating the same person over and over again. Unlike Haruhi, I cared about the contents of the game more than winning or losing, I said.

“That’s a relief.” Koizumi chose black and put four handicap pieces on the board.

Koizumi and I silently played through the opening. Nagato was absorbed in her reading. The only sounds in the room were the clacking of the keyboard on which Haruhi typed and the shouts of the sports clubs that leaked in through the window.

It was a quiet early spring day. Nice, peaceful, and nothing was changing.

About five minutes passed that way, but eventually there was a hesitant knock on the door.

“I’m sorry I’m late.” Asahina entered with her ever-pleasant demeanor. Next to her—

“Yahoo!” Tsuruya waved her hand energetically, shining her full-face smile into

the room. “Greetings, my friends! I have once again brought tidings of an invitation! Ha ha ha, ’tis the second annual flower-viewing party!”

It was, she informed us, to be held during our upcoming break in the spring, the next Golden Week.

The invitations that Tsuruya passed out were on high-quality rice paper, and it was like they were handwritten by Yan Zhenqing himself, where the only thing I could read was the date. If Haruhi hadn’t read them aloud, I would’ve had to look up an art expert at a museum somewhere in the phone book.

Once Asahina finished changing into her maid outfit—Koizumi and I removed ourselves from the room during this—she served tea, which the SOS Brigade’s occasional guest drank from with an “Aah,” then spoke.

“Last time we went to see the *Yoshino* blossoms. This time we’re having a *Yaezakura* viewing party! ’Cause I mean, back in ancient times, that’s what they were talking about when they said ‘cherry blossom’! They get a lot of caterpillars on ’em this time of year, but they’re still so elegant.” Tsuruya gulped down the rest of her tea, closed her eyes, and began:

“Yaezakura blossoms, that at Nara, ancient seat of our state, have bloomed—”

Haruhi picked up the second part of the poem:

“—In our nine-fold palace court, shed their sweet perfume today,” she recited from the *Hyakunin Isshu* poetry collection with a firm nod. “It’s true, it’s worth criticizing the modern tendency to praise new varieties of gardening. While they’re blooming, the poor little yae trees are still working hard—we should definitely try to find a spot to see them. Good job, Tsuruya.”

I doubted there was anyone who deserved the phrase “good job” as much as Tsuruya did. I asked if the Tsuruya clan happened to be a noble family that could be traced all the way back to the Asuka period.

“That’s ancient history, so heck if I know! If you want to find out, you can have a look at our genealogy, but it’ll be a pain!” she rattled off, sounding rather knowledgeable. I hoped she stayed friends with Asahina. They were like a pair of queens—hearts and diamonds. So long as Tsuruya was with her, no miscreant would ever dare make a pass at Asahina. Haruhi? Oh, yeah—she was the joker.

The kind you need for five-card stud.

As I gazed happily at Asahina in her maid outfit, a sight I doubted I'd ever tire of, Tsuruya and Haruhi continued.

"In the peaceful light of the ever-shining sun in the days of spring—"

"—why do the cherry's new-blown blooms scatter like restless thoughts?"

"The depths of the hearts of humankind cannot be known, but in my birthplace—"

"—the plum blossoms smell the same as in the years gone by."

It seemed the two of them had started a *Hyakunin Isshu* recitation contest.

"On a mountain slope, solitary, uncompanioned, stands a cherry tree—"

"—except for you, lonely friend, to others I am unknown."

"If I lay my head upon his arm in the dark, of a short spring night—"

"—this innocent dream pillow will be the death of my good name."

"When I look up at the wide-stretched plain of heaven, is the moon the same—"

"—that rose on Mount Mikasa, in the land of Kasuga?"

"From Mount Yoshino blows a chill, autumnal wind. In the deepening night—"

"—the ancient village shivers: Sounds of beating cloth I hear."

By this point, the poems they were reciting didn't have anything to do with spring blossoms. They'd gone right past summer on into fall.

"Hah! You're pretty good. How about this one?" said Tsuruya, amusement on her face. "The mountain blossoms have bloomed, and in the far-off clouds—"

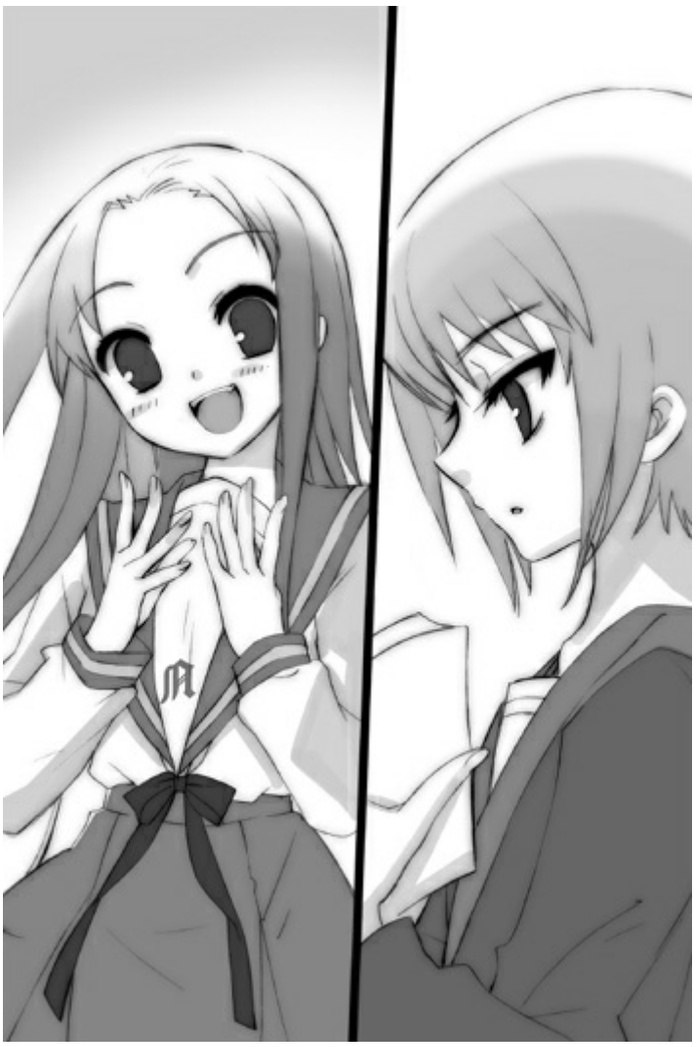
"Huh?" Haruhi, despite completing every other poem, was stumped. "I don't remember that one. Whose is it?"

Someone unexpected answered Tsuruya's trick question. It was the first time that day I heard her flat voice: "—I see the white thread of a waterfall." Nagato turned the page of her book. "By Toshiyori Minamoto," she added.

"Wow, impressive. That's the omniscient sorceress Yuki for ya!" Tsuruya

complimented Nagato with a cackle, but Nagato's eyes were unmoved. I wasn't sure what was supposed to be so funny. Maybe I'd ask later.

Tsuruya rattled off the openings of three more poems, all of which Nagato completed.



“Right!” said Tsuruya, satisfied. “Thanks, Mikuru—the tea was tasty! I’ll be counting on you this year again!” she said with gusto, and left the room. She was like a speedy, small-scale typhoon. Just when you thought she’d arrived, she was already long gone.

You couldn’t deny that Tsuruya was a genius at brightening a room. But something about her bothered me. I couldn’t conceive of what her face would look like if she were crying. She’s something else, that’s for sure.

Haruhi continued slurping her tea. “Well, that’s one more thing to do over Golden Week. Hmm, yeah, we should all compose short poems while looking at the blossoms. Ones good enough to put in a compilation and pass on through the ages.”

Apparently bored with typing, Haruhi gazed at the invitation Tsuruya left behind as though it were some sort of historical artifact. Just when I was about to ask her to let us compose jokey haiku instead, she seemed to suddenly remember something.

“Be that as it may, I’ve got to present what we’re doing tomorrow.” Haruhi jumped up on her desk, straddling it triumphantly. “I now pronounce the SOS Brigade’s first meeting of the new school year open!” she cried with a first-rate smile.

Like me, Haruhi seemed to have neither memory nor record of the total number of meetings we’d had, so she was happy to reset it and continue on to the rest of her agenda.

“This Saturday—that’s tomorrow!—we’re all meeting in front of the station at 9:00 AM. Don’t you think it’s about time for the mysteries of the world to show up already? We’ve been doing setup work for a long time now, and I get the feeling they’re ready to answer our efforts! And it’s springtime! The weather’s warming up, so we’ll catch them while they’re napping!”

This wasn’t exactly the retired-from-active-duty Shamisen we were talking about, and anyway, you couldn’t even catch a stray cat that way, I pointed out.

“Listen up, Kyon. Pretty soon it’s going to be a year since I started the club. The deadline’s approaching. So far, we’ve got exactly zero to show for our

efforts.”

To show whom?

“Ourselves! You can afford to be kind to other people, but you have to be hard on yourself, or you’ll never amount to anything! What’s the phrase again? ‘Small profits, big sales’? No… ‘self-sufficiency’? That’s not it…‘Trials and tribulations’? No… Mikuru, do you know it?”

“Huh?” Asahina, suddenly called upon, put her index finger to her chin. “Umm, ‘self-insurance’?”

“Perhaps you mean ‘reward the good, punish the bad,’ ” suggested Koizumi as he gazed at a black stone he held between his fingers. Just as I was trying to think of the right word—

“No compound term describing that concept exists,” said Nagato flatly, and I happily abandoned my turn to say something. Haruhi would have to invent her own term. Maybe something like, “Love thy neighbor, criticize thyself.”

Haruhi turned not to me, but to Nagato. “Really? I could’ve sworn there was one.” This seemed to satisfy our brigade chief, who normally gave us no more credence than she would an ill-fitting wooden door. “Okay, then, that’s it for the meeting. You’re free until it’s time to go home!”

She flopped down into her chair and started fussing with the computer again.

When the chime rang to drive away what students remained on school grounds, Nagato closed her book, and with that as our signal, we brought our day to a close. In a way, it was similar to how cicadas measured and signaled time with their buzzing.

After we were done waiting for Asahina to change, we put the clubroom behind us. The sun was on the verge of setting, and the air still had a chill to it.

As we descended the slope that began the route home from school, a gap naturally opened up between the boys and girls. Haruhi and Asahina walked side-by-side ahead, with Nagato stepping along silently behind them.

A few meters back, Koizumi and I quietly took in the sight of the three girls ahead of us. It was a good chance, so I went ahead and asked.

“So, how’re you doing lately?”

“Today’s the same as yesterday. Currently no change,” Koizumi answered with a brittle, dry-noodle smile. “I may be worrying over nothing. From Nagato’s and Asahina’s reactions, they don’t seem to have taken any special notice of Sasaki. Hopefully the recent incidences of closed space are merely a fluke.”

A bit of time had passed since the new semester started, but neither Nagato nor Asahina had made mention of my former classmate. Of course they hadn’t. I’d have a nervous breakdown if I had to be so careful every time I wanted to talk to an old acquaintance, I said.

“For anyone else, you needn’t be so careful. This is a problem because of Sasaki specifically.”

She was just a slightly eccentric girl, and I just happened to run into her, I told him.

“Hey, I wholly agree with you. I’m confident you’re right. From our perspective, that’s that, with no further reasoning necessary. What I’m worried about is other people misunderstanding—and those who would deliberately abuse that misunderstanding.”

“The heck are you talking about?” I couldn’t believe Kunikida or Nakagawa had anything to gain from that.

“Within your circle of friends, those two are harmless. However—” Koizumi said to my doubts, carefully re-shouldering his bag and shrugging. “No, never mind. If my worries are baseless, then so much the better. Oh, you can relax on one count, though. Sasaki will not be subject to any additional harm. The Agency will do no such thing. There is no reason to.”

Of course there wasn’t. What was he talking about?

“My apologies. I was merely attempting to dispel your anxieties, but please forget it. It was unnecessary.”

Wearing a sad, sad smile that would probably melt the heart of any obliging freshman girl, Koizumi faced forward. He was looking ahead past Nagato’s head to Asahina’s and Haruhi’s profiles as they happily chatted.

Later that day.

The usual walking-home-from-school scene played out, and we all went our separate ways in front of the Koyo Park train station.

“See you tomorrow.” Haruhi gave me a look that seemed to say, *Try to show up before me for once*, though I wasn’t sure. She turned her back and walked away, her school uniform’s ribbon and skirt hem fluttering. Asahina waved and followed the brigade chief. When I thought to look for her, Nagato was already receding into the distance toward her apartment.

“I hope nothing happens tomorrow,” monologued Koizumi quietly, and I thought that was exactly what would happen.

—However.

Koizumi was naive. And I was naive too.

Things were already happening. It was just that nobody had noticed, but things had already started. Starting with me, all of us had long since been tossed into the maelstrom. It wasn’t just the SOS Brigade, it was everyone—Kunikida, Taniguchi, Nakagawa, Sudoh, regardless of whether I knew them or not.

But days would pass before I would realize what was really happening. The next day? Hardly. But something that seemed like an omen would happen the next day.

Was it merely foreshadowing, was it a fated coincidence, or had someone arranged it…?

Saturday morning, 9:00 AM. I reunited with two individuals, was introduced to someone I’d never met before, and was told that someone else I knew was hiding nearby…

That morning, I somehow woke up ahead of both my alarm clock and my sister, and went about my morning routine of putting Shamisen—who slept with his head on my pillow—on the floor, then sitting up properly.

The refreshing awakening was cheer itself, and one I had not experienced on a weekend morning in some time. My feet were so light it felt like my body weight had been halved. Maybe the secret to good health was waking naturally, instead

of relying on my sister or the alarm clock.

I stepped lightly out of my room and enjoyed my first sister-free breakfast in quite some time, then changed clothes, got on my bike, and headed off. So early! The clock hadn't yet struck eight. At this rate, I had a chance to beat Haruhi. Or maybe Koizumi would've caught my drift and taken the trouble to show up last. Not that it would've been unreasonable to have Haruhi treat us all for once, but no doubt the Agency's wallet was deeper than a high school student's. I bet Koizumi made good money at his "part-time job."

As I pedaled happily along, I saw a confetti-scattering of pink out of the corner of my eye. All it would take was one more good rain shower to bring this year's cherry blossom display to an end.

Once I rode my bike to the entrance of the parking lot in front of the station, I took a look around.

I had the premonition that Sasaki was going to pop out of nowhere, but it goes without saying that my self-proclaimed middle school "really good friend" was nowhere to be seen. For Koizumi's sake, I was relieved. Not for my sake.

A look at my watch told me that I still had half an hour before the arranged meeting time. I had time to kill.

Humming as I left my bike in a paid parking space, I made my way calmly toward the rendezvous point and saw that nobody from the SOS Brigade was there.

But I was unable to enjoy a satisfied smile. Quite the contrary—I felt as though clouds had suddenly obscured the once-bright rays of the sun.

I stopped dead in my tracks, stunned.

"Heya, Kyon," Sasaki greeted me with the grin of someone who's successfully fooled another. "We meet again. I'm genuinely pleased. You might not be, but I definitely see a bit of fun in this situation. Although I must say it's a bit more interesting than it is exciting."

I stood there like a dead tree.

Sasaki was not alone. Two other girls attended her, one on each side. One of

them had a face I'd never forget. It was carved into a wanted poster in my mind. The only reason I didn't slug her right on the spot was the self-control I'd built up over the past year.

"You…!" How dare she be so nonchalant.

"Hello." She ducked her head and smiled. "It has been a while. How is your little time traveler, Asahina? Hee hee, don't make such a face. We've pulled back from such methods."

The incident from months earlier, in mid-February, went running through my mind.

Asahina had come back from eight days in the future. I'd called her Michiru Asahina. She and I had run around together, accomplishing various goals as directed by letters from Asahina the Elder. We'd played a prank by nailing an empty can to the ground, placed the gourd-shaped rock on the Tsuruya family mountain, dealt with the turtle and the boy—and then there was the thing with the mysterious data chip and the nasty rival time travelers…

And finally, Asahina's kidnapping.

At the end of a long car chase, one of the kidnappers who'd appeared with that other new time traveler guy was now standing right in front of me. She'd seemed like their leader. The girl who'd faced down Miss Mori's terrifying smile without even flinching.

She was now standing next to Sasaki, right before my very eyes.

Whether she knew about the history between the girl and me or not, Sasaki cut in with one arm. "I'll introduce you, Kyon. This is Kyoko Tachibana, my… well, let's call her my acquaintance. I've just come to know her and haven't shared enough discourse to call her a friend yet. Though some of what Tachibana says is very interesting indeed." Sasaki chuckled throatily. "By your face, I'd guess you've already met her somewhere. And that it wasn't a very happy meeting. I expected that, though."

"Sasaki…" I said in a hoarse, ancient-sounding voice. "Stop hanging around with jerks like her. She's—"

—our enemy.

“It certainly looks that way,” said Sasaki, unconcerned. “But she doesn’t seem to be *my* enemy. It’s very interesting, actually. She’s told me some truly unbelievable things. They’re hard for me to understand, but just thinking about them is a nice diversion. Like mental aerobics. Concepts I can’t accept, but which I can recognize.”

The kidnapper—Kyoko Tachibana—smiled, her lip twisting slightly. “Oh, but Sasaki, I want you to accept them, by all means. Otherwise”—she looked at me with eyes like a caged puppy’s at the front of a pet shop—“he doesn’t seem like he’ll listen. You won’t hear even three seconds of what I have to say. Am I wrong?”

She wasn’t wrong. She was dead right. Anyone who would dare to kidnap Asahina should be sent off to a courtroom to be judged, without a lawyer. Why wasn’t Koizumi here yet? What about Miss Mori and Mr. Arakawa, or the Tamaru brothers?

“Kyon, are you listening?”

I told Sasaki to wait. I was in the middle of looking around for someone, anyone I could trust.

“Sorry about that. But there’s one more person I feel it would be good to introduce you to. Could you let me have the initiative to do that?”

Who was it, I wanted to know. If it was that nasty time traveler guy, then I didn’t need any introductions.

“I think I have an idea of who you’re talking about, but that is not who I’m talking about at the moment.” Sasaki gestured with her hand to the person standing opposite Kyoko Tachibana. “She told me she wished to occupy a shared space of a radius of two meters with you. So I figured why not introduce you, since she gave me the sense that if we let her be, she’d become even more of a problem for you. I guess I’d describe her as being more queer than strange, somehow.”

I looked where Sasaki indicated I should.

At first I didn’t know what I was seeing.

Like a drop of black ink plopped into water, a dark and hazy fog… that was my

first impression, and it took a few seconds for my brain to recognize that the image received by my retinas was that of a girl—a girl wearing the black uniform of Koyo Academy.

Yet the moment of recognition came with the sense that this girl had been standing stock still, right here, for a century. What could this aura be, I wondered.

She stood out in a crowd—it was a tired old phrase, but I'd never seen anybody in my life more deserving of it.

"Wha…?"

It was absolutely the first time I'd met her. Even a glance at this girl would've been unforgettable.

But what was this wintry, snow-covered-mountain chill that I felt? It seemed like I'd felt it before—

She slowly raised her head, and the moment her face and eyes were revealed, every hair on my body stood up. She had to be a ghost. She wasn't a person. She was no human.

"—"

Her face was an inorganic white, with eyes like black crystal, and she had dark hair, so dark it seemed sprayed with a matte finish. Her hair was long enough to extend past her waist, and it was wavy to boot—in its volume and length it was like a great mop. It spread out left and right as much as it fell down, such that you could say most of her surface area was comprised of hair. It was like nothing I'd seen before, and it wouldn't have surprised me if she'd flapped her hair like wings and flown up into the sky. It was inescapably prominent, but I hadn't even noticed it until Sasaki had introduced her, which was deeply strange.

A quick look around me revealed that, indeed, while passersby were noticing Sasaki and Kyoko Tachibana, they were not looking at her at all.

"Who are you?"

"—"

She stood there, not so much as making a sound or blinking, staring at me as if

she were trying to identify a single pigeon among a flock at a shrine. It was a more mechanical gaze than any machine. Even the cheapest digital camera's lens had more emotion than her eyes.

"—"

Her expressionlessness was similar to Nagato's, but of a different type. The manufacturer and designer were different. If Nagato was like an icicle in a field, this girl was like dry ice. She wouldn't melt; she would just sublimate and disappear.

Her pale lips moved out of obligation. "—Ah…" Her mouth opened and from it emerged, surprisingly enough, not white smoke but a regular human voice. Contrary to what I expected, I must confess that I was taken aback.

"I am—an observer. The time—in this place… moves very… slowly. The temperature—tiresome."

The quality of her voice made her sound so drowsy she was on the verge of death. If voices could have a color, hers was the monochrome sepia of old film.

Not taking her eyes off me, she continued. "—This time… there is—no mistake—you are… him," she said incomprehensibly.

Her appearance being what it was, it overlapped with my impression of what was going on here. Still, what was this unease? This feeling of déjà vu?

"—I am—" she said, very slowly, then continued. "Kuyoh—"

"Kuyoh?" The instant I was going to ask what characters she used for that surname, she continued.

"Suoh—"

"Huh?" So it was Kuyoh Suoh, then?

"…—Suoh—Kuyoh—"

What? Which was it? Having two surnames was strange enough, but now it sounded like she was short a gear or five in her head.

Sasaki chuckled quietly, which brought me back to reality. "Kyon, she's always like that. Interesting, isn't she? I call her Kuyoh, but what she's lacking isn't

gears, but a sense of concrete individuality. She doesn't fully understand the notion of being an individual. No, no—she's not sick. That's just the way she is. I can't explain it any other way."

Whatever her problem was, trying to talk to this Kuyoh girl was way harder than conversing with Nagato, even back when I'd first met her. Wait—Nagato?

—Could she be somewhere nearby?

—It was possible.

The SOS Brigade's winter trip. The blizzard on the ski slope. The phantom mansion that had appeared in the snow. Nagato collapsed with a fever there, and with her hint, Haruhi's intuition, and Koizumi's quick wits, we escaped, and now the whole episode seemed like a daydream.

Extraterrestrial beings unrelated to the Data Overmind—the Macro-Spacial Cosmic Entity.

"I see." I burned the image of her face into my brain cells so I'd never forget it. "So it's you. The other aliens, not like Nagato."

"—Aliens…—? What—is that…"

"Don't play games with me." It was immediately obvious, even to me, what was going on here. The kidnapper, Kyoko Tachibana, was in opposition to Koizumi's Agency. That nasty guy from the future was Asahina's counterpart, no question. So by elimination, the answer was clear. The one dealing with Nagato was this Kuyoh Suoh girl—bingo. I was assaulted by the urge to yell, *Tallyho!*

A conversation I'd had with Koizumi on the way back from the Tsuruya mansion suddenly came back to me.

—Let us suppose, hypothetically, that there are Nations A and B, who (redacted) are opposed by nations C and D, respectively, whereupon C and D ally themselves—

So it had finally happened. If Nagato's Data Overmind were F, then this girl was the adversary of F.

I stood there on my guard, and she looked at me like I were a bronze bell in a temple somewhere.

“—Your—” she said, in a voice that wavered like an old cassette tape. “—Eyes—very—beautiful…”

It was a perfectly meaningless line.

Conclusion: she was an interface far cruder than Nagato, Kimidori, or even the late Ryoko Asakura. Trying to uncover her true intentions was nothing more than a waste of time. And I didn’t want to know, anyway. I had no intention of getting to know her, I said.

“That’s what you would say, Kyon,” said Sasaki, holding her stomach to keep from bursting out laughing. “But they’re all I have. Nobody else would get close to me. Is there a wide variety of interesting people like Kuyoh at North High? That seems quite nice, but unfortunately I’m not a North High student. I might complain about it, but I have to spend two more years where I am. If I can manage to get into the college I’m aiming for, I have every intention of enjoying it to death.”

“Sasaki,” I said to my former friend. “Do you know what these people really are?”

“They made me listen, so yes, I know. It’s a rather incredible story. If you want to know whether I believe it or not, I wasn’t sure.” Sasaki’s eyes crinkled as she smiled. “But I can tell by your reaction—they’re the real thing.” She cast her gaze over Kuyoh and Kyoko Tachibana. “An extraterrestrial humanoid interface and a limited superhuman. And a time traveler, was it? Seems closer to triple trouble than it does to three of a kind.”

Knock it off, Sasaki. Don’t give me this pointless chatter. You’ll only repeat my mistake. Damn—Kuyoh the ghost was one thing, but I probably would’ve treated Kyoko Tachibana differently if this had been our first meeting. But since I already knew her smug, indifferent face, I couldn’t help but have an attitude. But Sasaki had a sharp mind and sharp eyes. Even if I tried to sway her now, my arguments wouldn’t have any teeth.

Kyoko Tachibana the ringleader still had that warm smile of hers on; you’d never guess she was a criminal. Had her actions back in February just been a deliberate setup for her performance now? Which meant the same was true for that smug time-traveling bastard. Where the hell was he, anyway?

I was looking around suspiciously when Kyoko Tachibana spoke up.

“He said he was going to skip this ‘ridiculous errand.’ He’s around somewhere, but he won’t be showing up today.”

She emphasized the word “today,” making it clear that she was delivering the word from him.

Well, the feeling was mutual—I didn’t want to see his face either. In fact, I wanted to decline acquaintance with the two mysterious girls in front of me too, I said.

“Well, we can’t have that. No matter how much we might delay it, it would always come to this eventually. And we’ve waited quite some time. Hasn’t it been long enough?” She closed her mouth and laughed a voiceless laugh. “I’m sure he feels the same way. That which must come, will come. The quicker wound is the lighter one, isn’t it?”

She stressed the word “he,” and I thought she was still referring to the time-traveler guy, but I was wrong.

Kyoko Tachibana’s gaze passed through me as though I were invisible and looked behind me. A chill of terror ran up my spine. It’s often occurred to me that you see words like “chill” or “terror” or “indescribable” all the time, but the experiences they actually describe are very rare—as rare as seeing a spider carrying a piece of mochi or onion on its back.

All was lost. I knew that now. I felt the chill of an indescribable terror.

I looked behind me.

Koizumi was standing there. He must’ve come from the ticket booth and was dressed in a casual but completely flawless outfit, hands in his pockets as though he’d been waiting for me to notice him.

And if it had been just Koizumi, that would’ve been great. He was the only North High student I could count on to debate the trio of opponents I faced.

“Uh…” I said, feeling a drop of nervous sweat.

In what could only be thought of as the worst possible situation, next to Koizumi stood the wielder of absolute power over the SOS Brigade, Haruhi

Suzumiya, regarding me as though she were a powerful feudal lord returning to punish a corrupt magistrate. Nagato stood diagonally behind her, and even Asahina was there.

In other words, the members of the SOS Brigade had, at some point, assembled at the rendezvous point. And worse, they now formed a wall, like defenders trying to stop a free kick, keeping Sasaki and me out.

I checked my watch and saw that I still had fifteen minutes before nine o'clock. I didn't know how long they'd been there, but it looked like despite my not being late, I was still going to be last to arrive.

But this was not the time to be worrying about such trivialities.

Haruhi met my gaze and immediately started striding over. Behind her trailed the rest, like three ladies in waiting. Koizumi was dressed impeccably—it must be tiring, keeping that up—while Nagato, it went without saying, was wearing her school uniform, and Asahina wore a conservatively fashionable spring outfit.

I felt like an air traffic controller who was watching huge clouds and a low-pressure front closing in on the radar screen.

Haruhi stopped like an airport drug-sniffing dog having caught the scent of cannabis. "I was about to compliment you for managing to arrive early, but what's this? A prior engagement?"

"It's just a coincidence," answered Sasaki—but looking at me, not Haruhi. "If you live around here, this is the obvious place to meet up. I promised to meet with some friends here. Kyon, just like you, I have some friends I've made who are unbeknownst to you. We've now met up, and we'll be leaving."

That was a relief. Sorry, but I wanted them gone as soon as possible. And could she do me the favor of not going to the café nearby? I asked. That's where we were headed next. We'd be in trouble if there weren't enough seats.

"Very well. I'll consider that. It would be awkward if we met up again just after parting ways. I think we'll be getting on the train and going elsewhere," Sasaki answered, understanding my intention, then bowed to Haruhi. "Suzumiya, I'll leave Kyon in your hands. No doubt even in high school he doesn't put much effort into studying or club activities, does he? If he doesn't do something before

his mother's patience runs out, he'll be forced to go to cram school, just like he had been in middle school. I imagine that'll happen around summer vacation."

"Uh. Er. Yeah." Haruhi mumbled some vague words in order to avoid being totally speechless; her eyes were round like a kid who found a bug she'd never seen before in the mountains.

If it had been someone's goal to shake me up, these two were more than enough. But I was well aware that there was more going on.

On a weekend in front of a busy train station, there was nothing particularly noticeable about a group of high school students.

But on that corner, powerful forces had collided with each other—somehow I could hear the impossible sound of their grating.

Just as Sasaki showed Haruhi a smile, Kyoko Tachibana and Kuyoh were looking in different directions. In Kyoko Tachibana's eyes I saw the reflection of our stylishly dressed lieutenant brigade chief.

They did not greet each other. Koizumi's smiling poker face did not change. He seemed somehow annoyed, but I think I was the only one who noticed. On the other hand, Kyoko Tachibana had the satisfied smile of the young actress finally being on the big stage for the first time.

But they were not the source of the discordant sound. Two opposing humans could never produce such a thunder.

It was like a continental plate colliding with an ocean shelf, and it inspired a psychologically unsettling sensation—

"…"

"—"

The two forms of Nagato and Kuyoh stared at each other, unmoving.

Now that I thought about it, I'd borne witness to Nagato's anger a few times. The challenge against the computer club, and when the student council president had threatened to dissolve the literature club. I hadn't had the time to take note of her expression when she'd fought Ryoko Asakura, and it's possible she hadn't yet developed that emotion at the time.

But now, I finally understood.

My ability to detect changes in Nagato's emotional state, that ability I was so proud of, was still only at a middling level.

"…"

Nagato's clear, honest eyes and intently expressionless face were radiating a terrifying emptiness. In her transparent eyes was reflected the form of Kuyoh Suoh, the alien pseudo-human representative of some other intelligence.

The bustling noise of the people passing by us seemed to come from somewhere far, far away from where we were. I wouldn't have been surprised if the earth split and a giant cave cricket emerged.

The sense of unreality made it feel as though we were trapped in some alternate dimension.

"Um, excuse me…"

The feeling was dispelled by a fairy who had descended to Earth, a figure who engaged both my optic nerve and my protective instincts.

"Er, Kyon… what's wrong? You don't look well…" said Asahina, looking up at me worriedly. "Have you caught a cold? Oh—you're sweating. Let me get a handkerchief…"

She reached into her purse and retrieved a flower-patterned handkerchief, which she offered to me.

It was thanks to her that I snapped out of it. “I’m fine, Asahina.”

I didn’t want to soil her lovely little handkerchief with my sweat. My shirt sleeve would suffice just fine for that.

I was briefly thankful to that future bastard. Since he wasn’t here, Asahina didn’t have anyone to glare at, unlike Koizumi or Nagato.

I was sweating like I’d been thrust onto the stage of a live televised broadcast of a presidential campaign speech without a script. I wiped it off.

“I’ll be going, Kyon,” said Sasaki, who’d been having some kind of a conversation with Haruhi. “Oh, that’s right—when you have time, could you give Sudou a call? He’s started planning the reunion, see. He got in touch with me again, and I guess he wants you to be in charge of contacting people at North High.”

Why would he tell that to her instead of me? Maybe he was more interested in Sasaki than Okamoto, I said.

“Hardly,” said Sasaki immediately. “I’ve never done anything to make somebody like me. Never treated anybody that way either. You should know that better than anyone, right, Kyon?”

I did not, in fact, know that.

“Oh, really?” Sasaki chuckled. “We’ll just leave it at that, then,” she said cryptically, then waved her raised hand. “See you.”

Sasaki walked past me toward the ticket booth, and Kyoko Tachibana and Kuyoh quietly began to move. The former affected an air of blithe ignorance, while the latter seemed like a vague fog.

Koizumi and Nagato remained silent as though practicing Zen meditation, while Asahina was the only one who stared. She never failed to put me at ease. She was so lovely it made me dizzy. I love you, Asahina! I want to hold you in my arms!

As we watched the three forms disappear toward the station, Haruhi muttered, “What a weirdo. Hmm, still, she is awfully interesting, considering she’s one of your friends. Although she does seem a little contrived.”

I bet she'd consider that a compliment. That's just the kind of person Sasaki was, I said.

"Yeah, she does seem to have more friends than you."

It was true that she was a more social person than I was. But still, Sasaki.

I suppressed a sigh, and turned the thought over in my gut.

She didn't have to go and make friends with aliens, time travelers, and espers. There's gotta be a limit to expanding your horizons.

But maybe I shouldn't have been thinking about that stuff. My head wasn't exactly in the game at the time.

Kyoko Tachibana's match was Koizumi, Kuyoh Suoh's was Nagato, and the nameless time traveler guy's was Asahina.

So what about Sasaki? She had completely slipped my mind.

It had never occurred to me to wonder who she'd be matched up against.

A few minutes after parting ways with Sasaki and her two superfluous sidekicks, the five of us piled into the café out of a sense of obligation. This was done in order to quietly listen to Haruhi regale us with her plans for the day.

This time, at least, the café visit shouldn't be my treat. This was the second time I'd been the first to arrive at the rendezvous point, and while I should've been able to commemorate the occasion, I wasn't taking any pleasure in it at all, since I'd hadn't actually been able to feel like I was waiting for anyone. It made me nostalgic for the one time I'd waited for Haruhi alone, when Koizumi, Nagato, and Asahina were absent. I mean, I'd wound up paying then too, but still.

"We all came to the ticket booth together, right?" said Haruhi, slurping her ice cream loudly. "Therefore, nobody was last. You just happened to be first. Therefore, we'll just split the check."

"Therefore," my foot. She even said it twice. Reusing adverbs made her sound stupid. And she shouldn't just go making new rules off the top of her head. Maybe I'd just conspire to show up doing the Oklahoma Mixer with Asahina or Nagato, I said.

"That's right out," she said, stirring her straw around. "I can't have you

coordinating ahead of time. And I might as well tell you that I'm impossible to trick. If I find out, that's ten times the usual fine."

And just who was going to investigate that? If we made sure our stories matched, there'd be no way to catch us, and the fair trade commission would be all over Haruhi, but—whatever. For ten times the fine, she'd have to have the bank issue a notice of deficit.

"Anyway, about today's plan." Haruhi finished her ice water and looked over the group. I did likewise, looking at the other three members.

Asahina clasped her cup of Ceylon tea elegantly between both hands as she listened with her usual intentness to Haruhi, Nagato gazed into her barely touched glass of apricot juice, and Koizumi had his arms folded, wearing his usual smile.

Appearance-wise, there was no change in the members of the SOS Brigade. Nagato aside, Koizumi's dedication to business-as-usual was admirable. I'd have to mention it to them later, I thought.

It would have to be later, I thought, because the next scene would surely be Haruhi making us draw lots to split up, but then—

"I've decided to stop splitting into groups," she said. "I've been thinking that maybe the reason we haven't found anything is because we're splitting into groups of two and three. Even if we can only cover one spot at a time, it's easier to notice something when there are more people looking. Five people is more than double two, after all." Haruhi gave me a questioning look. "Especially you, Kyon—you haven't been seriously looking for mysterious phenomena at all. You were even sleeping in the library once!"

So she remembered that. I spotted Nagato and Asahina move slightly out of the corner of my eye.

"Hey, Haruhi. These mysterious things you're looking for—what are they, again? Sorry, I've forgotten them, so could you refresh my memory?"

"This is the most basic of basics, so remember it well!" she said, irritated, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek. "Basically anything bizarre is fine. Anything questionable, anything puzzling, anything that seems like a mystery or

riddle, places where time or space are distorted, aliens pretending to be humans, and anything else like that."

Most of the things she was suggesting could be explained by the people that surrounded her right now, I thought, and sighed inwardly.

I'd have to find another time to have a talk with Nagato and Koizumi. Trying to secretly converse while we were all together was not a good idea. It was way too risky.

Given Nagato's and Koizumi's expressions, and the fact that Asahina was being her normal self, and the fact that my future self hadn't appeared to stir things up, I could conclude that I wasn't particularly cornered at the moment.

That was the important thing, I thought, as I gazed at Haruhi.

Her curiosity was on full-blast. Which was fine. Nothing was going to happen, so there was no need for me to talk her out of anything.

The existence of the SOS Brigade was itself absurd, but we'd weathered many storms and were all in the same boat; we would sink or swim together. While our captain was still drawing breath, we could continue to rampage over the seas in flagrant ignorance of the maritime safety code. We could set course for the Indian subcontinent and wind up on the peak of Mt. Ararat, no problem.

Sensing from Haruhi's overpowering aura that she was about to stand, I drank the last of my iced café au lait and swallowed the now-tiny ice cubes whole.

"Well, shall we go?" Haruhi began to reflexively pass the bill to me, but she then seemed to remember her promise to split the tab. With exaggerated nonchalance, she put her drink's straw, still thrust into her empty glass, to her mouth.

We walked around the neighborhood of the station for several hours after that.

A bit off the main street, there were new buildings and shops that hadn't been there a month ago, and others that were gone as though they'd simply been erased, and while it made me feel that time was passing awfully fast, perhaps this was normal in our commercialism-poisoned age. No sooner was a convenience store built than it was closed, with a new one taking its place with

Russian-rouletteish ephemerality—but still, seeing old haunts that remained unchanged was strangely comforting.

Thankfully we did not encounter Sasaki's group again. I prepared myself for it every time we rounded a corner, but Sasaki seemed to have actually gotten on a train and gone elsewhere. I was still not thrilled that she brought those two along, but I could tell that she was being considerate. I'd have to thank her later.

All day the five of us moved as a group, even during lunch, when we ate at a little curry shop whose owner ran it as a hobby and was very proud of his menu. It honestly felt like Haruhi and Asahina were window-shopping and the rest of us were just along for the ride; that's certainly what it would've looked like from the outside.

Asahina standing, eyes a-sparkle, in the accessories shop; Nagato being forced by Haruhi to try on various pairs of sunglasses in the glasses store; Koizumi making small talk about the weather or his classes at school—

Thus the day passed, so normally that it was weird.

Sure, it was fun. Got a problem with that?

That night.

Once the first mystery tour of the year ended without us being led to even one mysterious phenomenon, Haruhi gave the order to disperse, and I headed immediately home, eating dinner and then idling around for a while before taking a bath after my little sister.

I washed my hair with shampoo that was cheaper than the stuff made for cats, washed the day's dust and dirt from my body, then soaked in the tub for a while. For some reason I was humming the "Dinner Song" my sister had made up, maybe because I'd heard it so many times, when suddenly the door to the bathroom opened.

"Kyon! Telephone!" My pajamaed sister poked her head in the door.

Telephone? I'd wondered if I might get a call. I myself had business to discuss, after all. I prepared myself for either Koizumi or Nagato as my sister held the receiver with a huge grin on her face.

“They wanted to know if my big brother was in, and I said if they meant Kyon, you were!”

I told her to use the former term to address me. “Who is it?”

“A gi-i-i-rl,” said my sister, drawing out the word’s pronunciation. I wiped my hands on the towel wrapped pointlessly around my head and took the receiver from my sister.

Aren’t you normally supposed to ask who’s calling? It could’ve been some fishy telemarketer doing a hard sell.

“Oh, and Kyon, when you’re out of the bath, could you help me with math homework? Arithmetic dri-i-i-lls—” she sang in a strange melody, then stuck her tongue out, skipping clumsily out of the dressing room like a kindergartner.

A girl calling me now?

If it wasn’t Haruhi, who could it be? Given the morning’s events, maybe Nagato. Or possibly Asahina… though surely not the Elder. I wasn’t in the mood to hear a bunch of bizarre warnings.

“Hello?” I hung my head over the edge of the bathtub to avoid dropping the receiver in the bath.

“Hello,” came a voice like a mountain echo.

CHAPTER 2

α—1

“Hello.” The voice was like a mountain echo; it was a woman’s voice, one I had no memory of hearing before.

It was neither Haruhi nor Nagato, nor the Asahina of any time plane. Not Miss Mori or Sakanaka, much less Kuyoh Suoh or Kyoko Tachibana, nor even Sasaki, of whom there was some small possibility. One word was enough to know. It was nobody I knew, a voice that had never once vibrated my eardrums.

“Ah. You’re in the bath, aren’t you? I’m ever so sorry. Excuse me. Shall I call again later?” Before I could say that wasn’t necessary, she continued. “But, but, I shouldn’t call too many times, so. Again, I’m so sorry.” Her voice emerged from the phone like the sound of a running river.

“Who is this? Just tell me your name.”

“It’s me. M-E, me.”

No, this wasn’t Haruhi, so that did not constitute a self-introduction, I said.

“Aw, c’mon!” said the voice. Since it was coming through the phone, I can’t say it was very clear, but the voice’s owner was speaking brightly and cheerily. “But that’s okay. I just called to say hello. Hee hee, your little sister’s a cutie. I always wanted a little sister like that. ‘Arithmetic dri-i-i-lls!’ So cute!”

Now then, I thought. I still had no memory of hearing it, but its intonation sounded like someone speaking in a voice they would normally never use. But no matter how much I searched my internal voice recordings, I couldn’t find it. It just sounded young, sort of like my little sister’s.

“I just wanted to hear my upperclassman’s voice,” said the voice’s owner. “That’s all. I just wanted to. I might need your assistance in the future, so thanks

in advance. I hope we can be friends for a long time.”

Now wait just a minute. She was calling me an upperclassman? Which meant she was younger than me. Still, the reality was I didn’t remember her, but before I could press her for her full name—

“I’m hanging up. If we have a chance to meet, I’ll see you then. Hee hee.”

Click.

She hung up rudely.

What was going on here? Having met Sasaki for the first time in a long while, plus Kyoko Tachibana and Kuyoh Suoh, I was at my limit. I didn’t want any new characters showing up for a little while.

I had a sudden realization and looked at the caller ID history. Of course she’d used a blocked number.

I got out of the bath and put on my pajamas, all the while asking myself if I had any clue as to who the girl was, but it was a waste of time.

“What’s with today, anyway?”

There was no point in thinking about it. Whatever was going to happen would happen. And if it wouldn’t happen, I’d find some kind of reason to make it happen. If it came to that, I could consult (in order of degree of difficulty) Koizumi, Asahina, Nagato—and an infinite distance beyond that, Haruhi. I couldn’t be held responsible for what would happen after that.

“What a pain.”

Tomorrow was a full day off, and so long as Haruhi didn’t hit upon something while I was asleep, I’d be able to enjoy my Sunday.

I carried Shamisen like a heating pad in order to ward off the post-bath chill, and I headed to the room where my sister waited.

β—1

“Hello.” The voice was like a mountain echo; it was a woman’s voice, one I’d

heard just this morning.

I would've preferred it to be Haruhi, Nagato, or even Asahina the Elder. Haruhi probably would've just gone on about her plans for the next day, and Nagato would've needed to brief me on Kuyoh. There were any number of questions I'd saved up for Asahina the Elder.

"Ah, bathing, are you? Your sister should've said something. Shall I call back? Although the fact that you picked up the phone suggests that you're going to get out of the bath comparatively soon."

It was not anyone I'd guessed it might be. I said the familiar voice's owner's name. "Sasaki, huh?"

"Indeed, it is I. About this morning, I'd wanted to talk a bit more, but Suzumiya and the others arrived early. I suppose you could call it a miscalculation." Sasaki's voice chuckled. "Still, your little sister hasn't changed a bit. I told her my name, but she either didn't catch it or didn't remember me—but I suppose that's not surprising. We've only met twice—wait, three times, I think it was."

"If you want to be her math tutor, that's plenty." This was one of my few contributions to the household.

"I know. I've no intention of snatching your little sister away. There are billions of perfect strangers in the world, but only a few are related to you by blood, so their value rises in proportion to their scarcity. Such relationships must be treasured—blood is thicker than water."

"So what do you want?"

"You certainly do get right to the point. I'd like you to come to the usual spot at the station tomorrow. You know the place I'm speaking of. As for the business—perhaps it would be better if Tachibana and the others explained it instead of me. My guess is that you'll understand it better than I do."

"So they're all coming, then?" I got irritated thinking about the silent, eerie Kuyoh.

"Yes, and he'll be there too—the self-proclaimed time traveler."

This just got better and better. If that guy spouted off more nonsense about

Asahina, I wasn't confident I could control myself. If it looked like I was going to slug him, Sasaki had better stop me, I said.

"So you'll come, then? Kyon, don't worry. All three of them just want to have a peaceful conversation with you. A verbal exchange of views is what everybody hopes for."

Sure, so long as that alien can actually speak Earth language. Speaking of which—"Sasaki, where did you go with that crowd today?"

"So I need an alibi now? We got on the train and took it to the shopping district, where we wandered around for a while. Tachibana is quite the good-natured young lady, you know. She told me all about her high school." Sasaki then casually added, "And about what happened four years ago."

Four years ago.

I'd first heard about it a year earlier, when it had been three years ago. It was like a buzzword that was on everybody's lips, a punch line that made everyone shake their heads. It was the amount of time passed since Haruhi had used her bizarre superpowers to do something. Four years—time for another Olympics.

“What did she say?”

“You should ask her yourself. It’s still confusing to me. Ah, Kyon—I’m actually quite worried about all this. I feel like a grade-schooler who can’t swim, and my first pool class is tomorrow.”

I recalled Sasaki’s swimsuit-clad form as she loitered beside the pool in middle school. She was a girl, wasn’t she? So long as she was mixing with other girls in our class, she seemed like a totally ordinary female student. Her only above-average qualities were her politeness and the sparkle in her eyes as she chatted. Yes, so long as she was talking to someone other than a boy, she was a middle school student—now high school student—like any other.

And yet in spite of all that, why would Sasaki be going to the trouble of making this kind of bizarre phone call? It was highly irregular. There had to be some mistake somewhere. Whose fault was it?

“Sasaki. I know you’re the mouthpiece for that group. But what I don’t know is why you’re doing it.”

Over the telephone, Sasaki was quiet for a moment, then seemed to suppress a chuckle. “Because I’m your good friend. Better me than one of the others, right? I know you’re not so easy to fool that if one of them called you, you’d just say, ‘Oh, really?’ and come right over. Although you are pretty easy to argue with.”

I told her I wasn’t trying to win a debate with her.

“You’re an excellent listener. Clever enough, but ignorant to a certain degree. Don’t be mad; it’s a compliment. It’s not any fun for the speaker if the listener refuses to understand what she’s saying, but there’s also no point in conveying information the listener already knows. On that count, I don’t need to worry about you, Kyon. You have that feeling about you. You’re easy to talk to.”

Somehow I didn’t feel like I was being complimented, but if it was Sasaki talking, I’d go along with it. Now that I thought about it, it had always been this way.

“I’ll be hanging up soon. I don’t want to take away from your sister’s study time. I’d hate for you to lose the opportunity to show off as her older brother.

Make sure you arrive on time tomorrow—otherwise I'll have wasted my time flipping through the school name registers looking for your information. It would've been quicker if your phone number were written on your New Year's card."

I'd be there. Oh, I'd be there, all right.

I definitely wanted to have a conversation with them. They were an alien, time traveler, and esper whose enemy status I no longer needed to confirm via IFF. It was convenient that they'd all decided to meet me together, rather than separately.

"Make sure you don't catch cold after your bath. My regards to your family." She hung up unhurriedly.

I hurried out of the bath, changed into my pajamas, and dashed into my room.

β—2

On the bed, Shamisen was using my cell phone as a pillow; I picked it up and dialed. The answer came after one ring.

"This is Koizumi."

I was impressed at his speed; it was as though he'd been sitting next to the phone, waiting for it to ring.

"Well, I suspected you would call. It's almost too late. I honestly expected you to call right after we dispersed."

I called immediately after Sasaki called me. If this was late, then I'd have to start putting tachyons in the phone line.

"Ah, seems our conversation isn't meshing. I see—you received a call from her, did you? I wasn't speaking about whether or not Sasaki called you, but rather that I expected you to call me. Didn't you have something you wished to ask of me?"

"Do you know someone named Kyoko Tachibana?"

“Of course I do. She is in the management of an organization whose path will never intersect with ours—essentially, an enemy power.”

I very much wanted to know what sort of hostilities they engaged in. It didn’t seem as though they would be exchanging gunfire in secret, so—surely not psychic battles in closed space?

“That sounds like it would be rather fun. Unfortunately, it is nothing so easily understandable. She and her kind cannot enter the closed space that Haruhi Suzumiya creates… but Kyoko Tachibana’s faction and my Agency are not so very different. You could say that while we are founded on similar concepts, our interpretations differ.”

And that would be the theology that held that Haruhi created the world three… no, four years ago?

“As it is impossible to prove, that must remain a mere hypothesis, but to speak plainly: yes. It has many believers within the Agency. As regards the fact that Haruhi Suzumiya gave us in the Agency our power, that has one hundred percent agreement. It transcends reason and is an unshakeable conviction among us all, including me.”

And what about Kyoko Tachibana?

“Consequently, she is a representative of those who did not receive power from Haruhi Suzumiya. Or perhaps I should say ‘nonetheless.’ They believe themselves to be the rightful group. Unlike us, they do not think of Suzumiya as the ultimate authority. While they should simply stand aside and observe, their rash understanding compels them to attempt to enter the stage. Though I must say I sympathize with the urge.” Koizumi’s tone was scattered with compassion. “So, what did Sasaki have to say?”

“She wants to meet tomorrow.” I briefly relayed the contents of Sasaki’s call. “I don’t know what it is, but she seems to want to talk to me. I mean, I sure as heck have some stuff to say to her. I’m gonna give them a real earful.”

Koizumi gave a short laugh. “I should explain that Kyoko Tachibana will never use violence against you or Suzumiya. I expect she was against the previous kidnapping incident. And the two of you are very important to her and her organization. The dangerous one is Nagato’s counterpart. Her kind is even

harder to understand than the Data Overmind.”

After he cautioned me to please be as prudent as I could, I ended my emergency-hotline call with Koizumi. I can say that the reason the conversation hadn’t dragged on longer was because Koizumi understood what I was getting at. If I were kidnapped, I’d be counting on him.

“Now, then.”

It was time to call Nagato.

I had her number so thoroughly memorized, there was no need to consult my phone’s memory.

This time, I had to wait for three rings.

“…”

“Nagato, it’s me.”

“…”

“About tomorrow—” She hadn’t given me a proper response, but I could tell who it was from the quality of the silence. I just kept talking. “—So that’s why tomorrow I’m going to be seeing the same alien we saw today,” I finally said.

“I see,” came Nagato’s blunt statement.

“Assuming Sasaki can be trusted, they’re basically peaceful. Koizumi seemed to mostly agree. What do you think?”

“…” There was a silence like she was looking up words in a dictionary. “At present, the risk is low. A low-enough level to be ignored.”

I believed it, if only because Nagato said it. I felt my body relax.

“The Data Overmind is currently dedicating all resources to analysis of them.”

“Have you figured anything out?”

“Not yet. Only that it is a macroscopic information consciousness.”

“Were you able to say anything to that Kuyoh girl?”

“I was unable to share basic concepts. Her cognitive processes remain unclear.”

So the mysterious alien remained a mystery.

Just as I was wondering if there was some way I could capture the Kuyoh girl and turn her over to some kind of space research agency, Nagato suddenly spoke up.

“Their designation has been temporarily determined.”

“Oh ho. Care to let me hear it?”

“*The Heavenly Canopy Dominion*.”

Without consideration for any theatrics, Nagato continued.

“Because from our perspective, they came from the heavens.”

α—2

Having dispatched my homework, I deposited Shamisen in my sister’s room before returning to my own, falling into the bed, picking up my cell phone, and dialing. The answer came after one ring.

“This is Koizumi.”

I was impressed at his speed; it was as though he’d been sitting next to the phone, waiting for it to ring.

“Well, I suspected you would call. It’s almost too late. I honestly expected you to call right after we dispersed.”

I wasn’t that impatient. The truth was that I needed some time to collect my thoughts.

“About that group today—what the hell were they?”

“That’s a question I’d like to ask you as well, but regarding Kyoko Tachibana, there’s little of note. I expected her faction to start becoming impatient soon. The kidnapping incident was their opening move. Of course, it’s not certain that it was made at Kyoko Tachibana’s behest.”

To think he’d be arguing for the defense.

“For my part, I only wish to avoid pointless fighting. Violent conflict does not particularly suit me. Fortunately Kyoko Tachibana can still be reasoned with. There’s the old saying—‘A wise enemy is better than a foolish ally.’ In any case, I would’ve preferred they continue watching from the sidelines, but this too may be an opportunity. ‘When comes winter, spring too is nigh,’ they say. Don’t you think this is better than continuing a glacially paced cold war?”

So long as it didn’t grate too much on my nerves.

“Another possibility—the time traveler may have indoctrinated her. Given that Nagato’s opponent has also appeared, her faction will also have to move.”

But what did they want?

“To be honest, Kyoko Tachibana’s organization and my Agency are not so very different. You could say that we are founded on similar ideas, though our explanations for Haruhi Suzumiya are different. However, they wish to reject, as much as they can, the possibility that they are mistaken. I understand the urge. The same is true of me. We are able to wield a supernatural power because Suzumiya gave it to us. This is an unwavering conviction.”

And that would be the theology that held that Haruhi created the world three… no, four years ago?

“It is not a matter of believing or not believing. Setting aside talk of ‘God’ for a moment, there is simply no doubt that Suzumiya is the source of closed space, and that we were created in order to deal with that closed space. I have known that from the very beginning. It will not do to be told, now, that I was mistaken. It is something I cannot concede.

“It would be best if the problem could be solved via debate,” said Koizumi in a resigned tone. “But let us not worry about Kyoko Tachibana and Sasaki. They are, at least, humans who live in the same time period as we do. Their values can be shared and they can be easily observed. But the movements of the TFEI that opposes the Data Overmind are totally opaque. Given the fact that Kuyoh Suoh is the only individual of her kind we’ve observed, she is likely the only instance of her kind on Earth. Since her methods are incomprehensible, her goals are likewise. Compared with her, time travelers are practically cute.”

Asahina was obviously cute, but the same could certainly not be said of all time

travelers.

“I quite agree. As Asahina’s actions are the same as ours, she falls within our area of protection. She is a magnificently adorable upperclassman, after all. We certainly won’t abandon her. However, we had no desire for the conflicts of the future to be dragged into the past. But surely the various time travelers can work out their differences themselves.

“To do otherwise would be awfully irresponsible,” Koizumi added. “Nagato and I will take care of the rest. And you, of course. I’m quite sure you won’t sit idly by if you see the hand of evil closing in on Suzumiya.”

I guessed not. She was our brigade chief, after all.

“We need only to wait for our opponent to take action. There’s no need to worry more than usual. After all is said and done, we do have Suzumiya on our side.”

α—3

Just as I finished my call with Nagato, my sister—evidently unable to wait any longer—came into my room, bringing her homework with her. However, she then scattered her pencils and drill book on the floor and started playing with Shamisen. It took an hour for her to finish her homework. She’s definitely related to me, as she has no real talent for academics. She can do simple arithmetic well enough, but if there’s a twist, she gets totally stumped.

I handed her the notebook and practical drill sheets that I’d solved for her. “When you’re done, get out—and if you can, take Shamisen with you. He’s awfully heavy when he sleeps on my bed.”

“Shami, wanna sleep with me?”

The calico cat looked at my sister dubiously, then slowly curled up on my bed.

“He says no.” My sister seemed somehow happy as she gathered up her homework and danced out of the room. It was nice when she did as she was told. I’d give her that much.

I casually turned on the TV, flipping channels without really watching anything as I thought about the next day. It would probably be best if I prepared.

Might as well get a good night's rest.

α—3

After finishing my call with Koizumi, I thought about calling Nagato, but ultimately I decided that it was getting late and I didn't have anything in particular to say to her, so I left the phone on the pillow.

If Kuyoh were some kind of death goddess who represented an immediate threat to Nagato, Nagato wouldn't just sit there silently. And tomorrow was Sunday. Our benevolent and merciful brigade leader had seen fit to bless us with a day of rest, so I should probably make the most of it and rest up.

On Monday I'd see them all again at school, whether I liked it or not. I could hear Nagato's lecture on aliens during lunch in the clubroom.

Just as I was thinking of reading a book I still hadn't returned, there was a scratch at the door. I opened it and Shamisen came in with a sleepy look on his face, purring. Without so much as a word of thanks for me, his bellboy, he climbed up to the bed, curled up in a ball, and closed his eyes.

With a face like both the world's life span and a cat's were eternal.

α—4

The next day, Sunday.

With nothing much to do, I read books, played video games, and basically passed the day lazing around to my heart's content. It was good to do this sometimes—good to have an idle day free from Haruhi and the rest.

I would see them tomorrow. The melancholic Sunday night was ending, resetting the week back to its beginning, the week whose only purpose was bringing yet another weekend.

Monday began.

β—4

The next day, Sunday.

At 7:00 AM I awoke and dressed myself completely, and by the time I was ready to leave the house, it was thirty minutes after my alarm had rung.

I had never before felt so much that my usual routines of eating early and dressing early were such a waste. It would've been nice to sleep a bit more, but if I'd gone back to sleep, I wouldn't have woken again for another two hours.

With nothing better to do, I was reading the morning paper when my younger sister, who generally boasted of being the earliest riser in the family, came into the kitchen in her pajamas and looked at me disbelievingly.

"Wow. You've gotten up before me two days in a row. Why?"

Could be any number of things. Believe it or not, I was a high schooler whose life was much busier than any sixth grader's. The time would come when she would look back with nostalgia on how easy she had it, I said. She'd better enjoy elementary school while it lasted and not write anything too crazy in her graduation essay.

"Huh. Hey, where're you going today? Out with Haru-nyan?"

If I were careless here, she'd wind up wanting to come along. No doubt Sasaki would tolerate it with a smile, but I could just imagine that future bastard's openly nasty face. Heck, I should just let her come along. It'd be more of a pain for them than it would be for me.

"I'm going to see some friends from middle school."

But in the end I decided to chase her off. I'd probably have more opportunities to see Sasaki again, but I didn't want to expose my naive little sister—who still believed in Santa—to harsh reality. The fact was that aliens were strange and time travelers were jerks, but even I didn't want to crush her dreams like that.

Just stay at home with Shamisen, I said. And if Haruhi happens to call, just put

her off the trail. My sister could say anything she wanted so long as she didn't mention so much as the *S* in "Sasaki."

"Okay!" She dashed upstairs to wash her face.

Now was my chance. It was quite early, but this was the time to leave. If my sister asked me any more questions, I might wind up letting the cat out of the bag. I just couldn't calm down in the house. The feeling of wanting to just get today's events out of the way weighed on my chest, and there was nothing I could do about it.

But just as I was leaving the house, I discovered that my rare early rising had borne fruit.

As though it had been waiting for me to open my front door—

"Rain, huh?" I replaced the bike key I'd just taken out and reached instead for an umbrella as I murmured the words.

The slight sprinkle with drops far apart enough to count took only thirty seconds to shift to a shower, and then to a downpour.

Despite the forecast that claimed there was but a 10 percent chance of rain, it was as though someone were controlling the weather to try and stop me from leaving—or perhaps the black clouds were meant as a warning.

Although there was no thunder.

Despite the curse of the rain, I headed to the station, where the same trio from the previous day awaited me.

Sasaki had a blue folding umbrella, while Kyoko Tachibana's was a designer model of some kind, and Kuyoh Suoh in her school uniform (like a rip-off of Nagato) held the kind of cheap transparent plastic umbrella you could buy at any convenience store; each one of them deflecting the rain in their unique ways.

Kuyoh's voluminous hair actually stuck out from under the protection radius of the convenience store umbrella, but it didn't seem to be getting wet. She also seemed to be invisible to random passersby, although not perfectly so, since when their umbrellas brushed hers, they would move aside. That was certainly convenient.

Incidentally, I wondered: the time traveler jerk hadn't shown up yet—was he wearing chameleon camouflage?

"No, he's in the café," answered Sasaki. "He said there was no way he was standing around in the rain, especially not to meet you. I had him go inside and save us seats."

What a jerk. Two months' time hadn't improved his attitude at all. Although I didn't know how much time had passed for him.

"Seems the two of you have quite a friendship. I haven't heard what happened, but I guess that's a better relationship than none at all. How nice," said Sasaki with a chuckle. "It's a relief. If he'd truly had bad intentions, he wouldn't have taken such a direct approach. It's not just you, you know. He treats me pretty much the same way."

Which was even more unforgivable. If he hated this era so much, he shouldn't have come. He should learn from Asahina's example. Even in this time, there weren't many people so eagerly devoted to making tea.

Sasaki laughed quietly. "I'd like to try Asahina's tea myself. Think I could visit North High sometime? I should've gone during last year's festival—too bad I missed my chance. I'll definitely come by this year."

I wasn't able to tell her she shouldn't come. "You can come, I guess, but our culture festival doesn't really have anything special to see—"

"Excuse me, you two." Kyoko Tachibana stuck her head between the two of us, keeping her umbrella held high such that it didn't collide with ours. "Could you save your chitchat for later? The reason I called you here," she began, clearing her throat and giving both Sasaki and me a wink, "is because we have a lot to talk about. It's very important. I believe Sasaki said this too."

"Sorry," said Sasaki with a smile. "It's not like I forgot. I just pretended to forget. To be honest, it's not a conversation I'm looking forward to."

Meanwhile, Kuyoh remained perfectly silent, as though she were a 1:1-scale figure. I guess words really weren't her strong point.

"We should hurry. I get the feeling that our messenger from the future is getting impatient in the café. It's about that time," said Tachibana Kyoko, and

started to walk. Kuyoh did likewise without so much as a nod, moving only slightly faster than a kasajizo carrying a heavy bag of rice down a snowy road. Set in her pale-white face were such sleepy-looking eyes that it made me wonder if she were actually asleep. I wasn't sure whether this alien had low blood pressure or was just bad with humidity, but she was definitely less energetic than she had been. If Nagato was diamond dust, Kuyoh was a fluffy, fragile snowflake.

Both Sasaki and Kyoko Tachibana acted as though Kuyoh didn't exist, probably because they knew that they could just leave her alone and she'd still follow them around. In this regard, their treatment wasn't unlike Haruhi's awareness of Nagato.

Kuyoh moved as expected, and despite her short stride, maintained a constant distance, never falling behind. As I also walked, I noticed something.

Our destination seemed to be the usual café that had become a standard part of the SOS Brigade's morning routine, the place where with 99 percent certainty a particular brigade member—namely, me—would pick up the tab.

My expectations were not betrayed, and the two girls stopped in front of the automatic sliding glass door, beyond which I could see him, face sulky, cup slightly tipped in his hand.

As soon as he raised his head and recognized me, his lip twisted; he seemed unamused.

Just as when I'd met him by the roadside flower bed, his smile looked like Koizumi's would, if Koizumi had fallen to the dark side.

There was no point in going this far to imitate the SOS Brigade, and it made me squirm. Even worse, the seat I was sitting in was exactly the same one I'd sat in the previous day, with Sasaki next to me and the three weirdos across from us.

The waitress brought us four glasses of ice water, and five mouths, mine included, showed no sign of movement.

I was busy glaring at the time traveler jerk whose name I still didn't know, while Sasaki's and Kyoko Tachibana's faces were relaxed, and Kuyoh was as still as a porcelain doll. Nobody made a sound. It felt like the last war council in a besieged castle that was about to fall to surrounding enemy forces.

It was finally Kyoko Tachibana who took the role of chairwoman. “So, a lot’s happened,” she said, breaking the ice, “but I am very excited indeed. Do you know how long I’ve waited for this day? We finally stand at the starting line. I thank you for this opportunity.”

She bowed her head to me.

“And to you too, Sasaki. I apologize for forcing the issue.”

“Sure,” said Sasaki shortly, looking up to me. “Kyon, you don’t have to look so scary. Just listen to what she has to say. I respect your judgment. You’ve got far more experience with this sort of thing than I do. My intuition and analysis are not particularly good, so I have to rely on precedent and experience. That’s why it’s so reassuring that you’re here. I’ve got no reference for any of this, you see.”

I took my gaze off of Asahina’s counterpart; watching him wasn’t doing my eyes any favors. “Let’s keep this short.”

I tried to sound as serious as I could, but the reaction from the time traveler was a sneering laugh. It bugged me.

“Let’s start with your name.” If he remained the anonymous time traveling jerk, my impression of him could only get worse.

In the face of my latest disdainful glare, the sarcastic face’s owner spoke; it was the first time in two months I’d heard his voice.

“Names are merely identifiers of convenience.” His scornful tone was just as I remembered it. He shifted uneasily. “Call me whatever you like. I don’t care. It’s meaningless. Just as meaningless as you calling Mikuru Asahina Mikuru Asahina. Absurd.”

He sure liked the negative. I should’ve approved my sister’s request and let her come along. A few words from this guy were all it took to depress me. And just what part of Asahina was meaningless?

“Yes, well, still,” said Sasaki. “In this day and age, it’s still useful to have a name to call someone, whether or not it’s his real name. It can be a government rank or position. ‘Magistrate’ is fine; just give Kyon something to call you, please?”

“Fujiwara,” he said with surprising readiness. “That is what you may call me.”

“You heard him,” said Sasaki after she heard the name, which was almost certainly fake. She shrugged. “So now you’ve been introduced to everybody.”

I knew their names, anyway. But I was pretty sure that wasn’t why I was here. It was easy enough to refer to them as Time Traveler Guy, Kidnapper Lady, and

Heavenly Canopy Dominion Alien.

“Yes,” said Kyoko Tachibana. “Now we’ll get to business.”

The probable esper girl cleared her throat and, flanked by the time traveler and alien, smiled like a door-to-door saleslady beginning her pitch.

“We believe that the true divine being is Sasaki, and not Haruhi Suzumiya.”

Suddenly, a bomb dropped.

I’d put the glass of ice water to my lips, and the thought of doing a spit-take crossed my mind, but I banished it immediately, swallowing as I set the glass back on the table and spoke. “What’d you say?”

“I mean exactly what I said. Is there something about it you don’t understand?” Kyoko Tachibana said brightly, then sighed in relief. “Whew, I finally said it. I’ve wanted to tell you for ages, but there just wasn’t a chance, and it’s bothered me for a long time. It would’ve been easier if Koizumi hadn’t been around. I even planned to transfer into your school this spring, but I was too afraid of him. The incident earlier only confirmed that. I definitely don’t want to see Miss Mori ever again.”

She giggled in a satisfied way, just like a normal high school girl.

“Yes. Just as Koizumi has been tasked with protecting Suzumiya, we must watch over Sasaki. But because the alien and the time traveler both went to Suzumiya’s side, I was just so incredibly worried about it. It was unbearable.”

She looked at her two counterparts, then continued. “In order to avoid identity collapse, I had no other choice. Koizumi had Mikuru Asahina and Yuki Nagato, but I did not, so I needed others. And now I’ve finally assembled them.”

This was not something to be trusted lightly. If Haruhi wasn’t the pseudo-god Koizumi said she was, then what had I been doing for the past year? Nearly getting stabbed by Asakura, actually getting stabbed by Asakura, spending summer vacation in a time loop, traveling through time, traveling back through time, following directions from the future, and above all having to play along with Haruhi’s impulses, and then there was that time Nagato rewrote the universe… If Haruhi wasn’t a walking mystery zone, then none of these things could have happened, I said.

“That is one way of looking at things. One reality. But reality is not limited to the singular. The surface can be a lie, obscuring the truth behind it—that’s standard procedure in mystery novels.”

For mysteries I suggested she see Koizumi, and for literature, consult with Nagato.

“Sasaki,” I said. “Do you believe any of this?”

Sasaki, flipping the menu over and regarding its back, looked up. “To be honest, I find it all very puzzling. I’m not especially interested in myself, and my desires are on the weak side. I think I’d prefer not to be elevated or worshipped. I tend to take a back seat in team sports, and I usually try to live my life so as not to cause other people trouble. What I hate most of all are self-centered, pushy people, but I also hate myself when I let that kind of person get to me.”

Sasaki raised her hand in order to get the waitress’s attention.

“By the way, since we haven’t ordered yet, have you all decided?”

Her mischievous smile was just like it had been in middle school.

The only person who spoke to the waitress, who wore a simple apron over her street clothes, was Sasaki, who said, “Four hot coffees.”

Fujiwara the time traveler and Kuyoh the alien took no action, the former only sniffing and the latter giving the impression of being immersed in an eternal silence, which was enough to make me wonder what kind of impression we were giving off. Even being optimistic, it seemed unlikely that we were being seen as a group of regular high school students and their friend. Compared to them, the SOS Brigade was practically normal.

It was Kyoko Tachibana who’d taken the first initiative to speak, and she again broke the silence. “So, that is how it is. You’ve heard the story from Koizumi, right? That about four years ago, Suzumiya probably created the world. She has strange power but is completely unaware of it, and she subconsciously creates closed space. Koizumi and his kind awoke, created the Agency, and have continued until now. Suzumiya continued granting her own wishes, summoning aliens and time travelers. But I, along with my friends, believe that this power truly belongs with Sasaki.”

She was free to believe whatever she wanted. There were no limits to the mind, after all. However, turning those ideas into reality was another matter entirely. This was a country with laws, and kidnapping was a crime.

I told them as much, and Kyoko Tachibana bowed her head.

“I apologize for that. But it was clear from the beginning that it would not work, since it involved forceful intervention from the future. I just wanted to try. I had no intention of succeeding. And yet I don’t feel it was a waste, since it conveyed our existence to you. That was a big step.”

If I were the moon, I’d probably have wondered why they were leaving weird footprints all over me.

“Four years ago,” said Kyoko Tachibana, as though she were recapping a TV show from the previous day to a friend, “I suddenly realized that I possessed some kind of power. I’d never felt that way before. It just came to me. I didn’t know the reason, and I didn’t know why it was me and not somebody else. What I did know was that I wasn’t alone, that there were others like me, and that the cause was a single person.”

Her shining eyes glanced next to me.

“And that was Sasaki. Before I even thought about it, I knew you were the one who gave this to me. I immediately started searching for you, and in the process met my comrades. All of whom had the same duty as me.”

I remembered the group of kidnappers that got out of the minivan.

“As we were debating whether to make contact with Sasaki, and if so, how to do it, we suddenly thought, ‘Huh?’—because another organization seemed to have been formed, one very similar to ours. And yet they seemed to be concentrating on another person instead of Sasaki.”

And that would be the Agency, eh?

“Yes. The ones who believe Suzumiya to be a god. We were conflicted. We thought they were mistaken. In order to correct their mistake, we met several times. But they said *we* were wrong, and they refused to listen to us. We could not accept that, and of course they couldn’t either. Communication broke down…” Kyoko Tachibana looked off into the distance but soon brought her gaze

back to the present. “And has never been reestablished.”

“So?” I said. What else could I say? “What do you want to do?”

The representative of the Agency’s rival organization took a deep breath.

“We believe the power Haruhi Suzumiya currently has rightfully belongs to Sasaki. Somehow there was a mistake, and they became different people. We want them restored. It would set the world moving in a better direction.”

She looked right at me.

“And I want your cooperation.”

“Sasaki,” I said, breaking from Kyoko Tachibana’s gaze. “So that’s what she says, but what do you think?”

“I don’t want this strange power,” said Sasaki clearly. “If you’ll pardon my saying so, on top of being an introvert, I’m a below-average individual. If I were given these fantastic, incomprehensible powers, they would only wither. It would definitely cause me mental instability. Yes, I very much wish to abstain.”

“You heard her,” I said. “The girl herself just said it. You might as well give up.”

“Are you really okay with that?” pressed Kyoko Tachibana. “Do you want to let Haruhi Suzumiya have that power? Forever? Do you want to be constantly manipulated by her? Do you understand that this is not just about you? The entire world will be under her control.”

That persuasive, urgent gaze remained on Sasaki.

“I want to say this to you too, Sasaki. You are more qualified than Suzumiya. This much is certain. This is not something you need to worry about. You need only remain as you are, living as you always have. I know this. You would never warp the world. And I know people who can.”

Sasaki’s gaze fell upon me. “Is that true?” she asked, a subtle smile on her face—the same smile I’d seen countless times in middle school.

My head was starting to hurt. I knew that Kyoko Tachibana was being entirely sincere. I understood all too well what she was trying to say.

Haruhi was like a time bomb without a countdown display, set to a random

amount of time such that nobody could predict when it would explode. The explosion's power, too, was unpredictable. The idea that such a person would possess the power to remake the world according to her whim—without the forbearance of Christ or the Buddha, no one could ever approve of such a thing.

But this was only if you didn't know Haruhi well.

I knew her, and Koizumi, Nagato, and Asahina knew her too. But these people did not. That was all there was to it. It was a simple thing to explain.

I faced Kyoko Tachibana again.

"I understand what you're saying, but what do you propose to do? No matter how you think about it, Haruhi has the ability to ignore probability—which can be troublesome, but in any case it's clear enough that she has the ability to make her wishes into reality. Like making cherry blossoms bloom in autumn. But Sasaki doesn't, right? So isn't that a stalemate? No matter how much you insist that Sasaki is the true deity, that doesn't change reality."

Haruhi didn't let her mind drift too close to the borderline, generally. You could call it a kind of common sense. The most she did was fix the lotteries to make sure I always wound up in the lowliest brigade position. She seemed to like the world the way it was, and she wasn't going to pointlessly destroy it. As far as closed space and <Celestials> went, they were a nice way for Koizumi to earn some pocket change but nothing to worry about past that.

"I suppose so," said Kyoko Tachibana with a sad expression. "I suppose so, but I can't help feeling that Sasaki is more suitable. You may know Suzumiya, but the same is true for Sasaki. And you've spent about the same amount of time with each of them."

It was true that my last year of middle school and my first year of high school represented similar lengths of time. But the density was different. I hadn't formed a ridiculous brigade with Sasaki and gone around killing time outside of school, and as far as the amount of conversation we'd exchanged, Haruhi won in a knockout. She was always behind me in class and had bossed me around in the literature club room every day since the brigade's founding. Furthermore, during the year I'd spent with Haruhi and the SOS Brigade, I'd had no contact with Sasaki. No matter how much I valued my friendship with my old classmate, I

couldn’t just throw away my current circle. It wasn’t just Haruhi—I’d come to rely on Nagato, Asahina, and Koizumi as well, and I had done them favors too. For their sakes, I couldn’t switch allegiances from Haruhi to someone else, nor did I want to.

The last thing I thought of was that even if Haruhi was a walking indeterminate time bomb, I wasn’t going to abandon her. I hadn’t even played my trump card on her yet. What could possibly be cooler than a dire situation?

“That puts Sasaki in a bad position too,” I said. “You should back off for your own good. Forget about Koizumi—if you do something to make Nagato angry, you could set off a chain reaction that puts Haruhi into a rage. And then who knows what will happen?”

“That’s why we must. I want to make sure that Haruhi never uses her transformative powers—then you’d never have anything to worry about either.”

Kyoko Tachibana clasped her hands together as though praying.

“We’re not doing this for our own benefit. Just look at Koizumi—keeping up with Suzumiya is extremely difficult. But with Sasaki, all that would go away. It’s what I wish for with all of my heart—for stability in the world.”

“Even so…” Sasaki sighed softly, then looked in the direction of the counter. “Our hot coffee sure is taking a while.” She nudged her glass of water with a finger. “Hey, Kyon, I was just thinking. How come with the words ‘elementary school student,’ ‘middle school student,’ ‘high school student,’ and ‘college student,’ only ‘high school student’ is written differently in Japanese? It seems like something worth thinking about.”

“Sasaki!” Kyoko Tachibana raised her voice impatiently, then soon looked down, embarrassed at her own outburst. She looked genuinely disheartened, and I could sympathize a bit. It wasn’t her fault. Maybe I shouldn’t be the one to say this, but Sasaki was a really solid person, despite being one of my friends. She wasn’t enough of a fool to jump at the chance to become a god.

Hey, I was starting to feel relaxed.

So long as Sasaki was Sasaki, no matter what enemies confronted her, she would not give in. Kyoko Tachibana had chosen the wrong person. Sasaki just

wasn't the type.

I pointed at the other two who'd thus far only listened—Fujiwara and Kuyoh. "What do these two think? I know you've got Sasaki made out as some kind of god, but what about your pals? Have you reached a consensus?"

Naturally the reason I asked this way is because from the look on the two weirdos' faces, Kyoko Tachibana's reasoning hadn't really gotten to them. Fujiwara was just staring, annoyed, at his chilled cup, while Kuyoh gazed out into space at nothing in particular.

The despondent Kyoko Tachibana peered out from between the gaps in her hair, and seeing the unmoved alien and time traveler, slumped even farther.

"You're right. This is another bottleneck. They're not the least bit cooperative."

Fujiwara sniffed derisively at Kyoko Tachibana's sad tone. "Of course not. Cooperation? I haven't fallen so far as to have to cooperate with commoners from the past. I came here thinking there might be something to be gained, but it looks like not."

He continued in a voice that made me feel like if Kyoko Tachibana were to get angry, I'd be on her side. "It doesn't matter who it is. Whether it be Suzumiya or Sasaki, if we think of them as natural phenomena, they're the same. There's not much value in an individual human. The power to warp time, the power to change space—that's all we need to observe. So long as the power exists, it doesn't matter whose it is." Fujiwara's gaze landed on Kuyoh. "You think so too, right?"

Kuyoh gave the time traveler no reaction. Her voluminous hair did not so much as stir in reaction to the café's air conditioning, and she was simply, incredibly still and unresponsive. I got the sense that she had no idea where she was. Or rather—was she even really in front of me? Even though she was right there before my eyes, her sense of substance was so rarefied as to be near zero. She had no thickness—even a plywood cutout would've had more life in it.

Just as silence was once again descending over the table—

"Hmph! Honestly!" Kyoko Tachibana looked up and spoke suddenly. "Give me

your hand," she said, her eyes serious. "It'll be faster if I just let you experience it instead of trying to explain it. Then you'll understand what I'm trying to say. Just for a moment, give me your hand."

She stretched her flawless hands out to mine, as though she were offering to read my palms. Just as I was wondering whether I should take them, given that I wasn't drowning, Sasaki elbowed me. "Kyon, just do what Tachibana asks, will you?"

I held out my right hand. Kyoko Tachibana's soft fingers grasped my palm, and she made another request. "Please close your eyes. This will only take a moment."

Feeling a sense of déjà vu, I did as I was told. My lightly closed eyes could still detect ambient light, and thanks to the lack of visual information, my ears were more sensitive, picking up the easy-listening classical music in the café. I think it might have been Brahms.

But—

"You can open your eyes now."

Kyoko Tachibana's signal corresponded exactly to the sudden disappearance of the background music.

I opened my eyes.

Kyoko Tachibana was holding my hands and smiling. Only Kyoko Tachibana.

I was surrounded by an overwhelming stillness. Sasaki, Kuyoh, and Fujiwara were gone. The other customers and café staff had disappeared. Like they'd been spirited away en masse, like the crew of the *Mary Celeste*, in the blink of an eye everyone was gone.

Kyoko Tachibana and I sat at the same table for a few moments, our hands still joined.

"Wha…"

My eyes roamed. The café with its soft ambient lighting was a mere husk of itself, with only us left behind. Before I could ask what was going on, I felt a sensation I'd felt before and remembered exactly what it was. A different place,

but one that felt similar—also with no people.

“Closed space…”

“That’s what Koizumi calls it, yes.” Kyoko Tachibana let go of my hands, then stood. “There’s not much to see, but would you like to take a look outside?”

Like a fish given water, Kyoko Tachibana took a graceful step and invited me up.

Nothing would happen so long as I kept sitting there. It had been quite a while since I’d visited closed space, and now that I thought about it, I’d only done it twice before—the first time with Koizumi and the second time with Haruhi. This was my third visit, and it felt similar to that cab ride with Koizumi.

I stood next to Kyoko Tachibana and watched the automatic door slide open. This was the same as before. For whatever reason, electricity seemed to work in this world.

Once outside, the first thing I did was look up at the sky. The rain had stopped. No—there weren’t any clouds. The sky was a sepia monotone. There did not seem to be a sun. The sky itself was the source of the light. The whole world was suffused with a sleepy glow.

“Let’s walk for a bit.” Kyoko Tachibana started walking, and I followed obediently along.

The town was a perfect no-man’s-land. Despite being shown this ghost town, I wasn’t particularly shocked. It was all exactly as Koizumi had previously explained to me.

The difference was—

The space I’d been drawn into twice before was completely gray-toned. Perhaps because it was nighttime, but I remember the dark, gloomy scenery quite vividly.

But the colors here were different. The world was lit in the soft, warm tones of oxford white and cream, seemingly brighter than the closed space of my memory.

There was another big difference. I moved my gaze through a full 360-degree

rotation, and there was something I failed to see. Even though there was no way one could miss those giant, eerie forms.

“Heh,” said Kyoko Tachibana, looking back at me. “That’s right. We don’t have those here. We never have. That’s the best part about this place. It’s quite nice, don’t you think?”

The blue-white giants, the masses of destructive energy, the instruments of Haruhi’s subconscious.

There were no <Celestials>. There was no sign that they would appear either. My five senses told me that much. In this closed space, there was nothing to threaten the world.

“Is this not closed space?”

“Oh, it is. The same kind you know,” said Kyoko Tachibana, seemingly pleased to be able to tell me. “But a different person made it. This is not a world constructed by Haruhi Suzumiya.”

Who besides her could create something like this…? Wait, not—

“That’s right. Sasaki. This is Sasaki’s closed space. Although it doesn’t feel closed to us at all. It’s like different people making the same dish. The flavor is a reflection of the individual.” She sounded like a real-estate agent introducing a property. “I feel calm when I’m here. It’s very peaceful and has a gentle atmosphere, doesn’t it? What do you think? Which closed space makes you feel safer?”

“Now wait just a minute.” If we were talking about which place I’d rather live in, the answer was neither. “You said Sasaki created this place? For what reason? When? Why aren’t there any <Celestials>? What does this world exist for?”

“There is no reason,” she said casually. “This world isn’t a temporary container or model. It’s always like this and has been from the beginning. Yes, for four years now. The reason there are no <Celestials> is because there’s no need for them. There’s no need to destroy anything.”

No matter how much I looked, I couldn’t see any birds in the sky. The silence was so keen it almost hurt my ears.

“That’s a huge difference. Sasaki has no desire to destroy or remake the world. She is, both subconsciously and consciously, totally stable. She’s ideal. She’ll never flip the world upside down because she doesn’t like it anymore. Everything will stay as it is.”

The only thing I could hear was the girl’s polite voice.

“So I will ask you again: which is better? A god who could carelessly destroy the world, or a person with common sense who won’t do anything rash?”

Unreasonably, I wanted to defend her. Haruhi had common sense too. She might seem to have a screw loose sometimes, but closer inspection showed that she was just an ordinary girl. I don’t know about the past, but the current Haruhi was getting closer and closer to reality. She still sometimes got a little out of hand, but she wasn’t going to make UFOs rain from the sky or anything.

The one thing I could say for certain was that she wasn’t going to remake the world ever again.

“You sound quite confident. I don’t think anyone knows what Haruhi’s subconscious is doing. Not Koizumi, and not the time traveler.”

Clasping her hands behind her, Kyoko Tachibana turned on her heel and looked me in the eye.

“I don’t know either, which is why I’m worried. But Sasaki is safe. You can tell just by looking around, can’t you? There’s nothing unstable about this place.” Her cheerful smile included a generous helping of charm. “That’s why I think Sasaki is the rightful owner of this power. I think it was meant to be hers. I think Suzumiya only became the way she is because of some kind of mistake.”

Haruhi’s still unexplained transformative power. It allowed Koizumi to become a scarlet ball of energy, attracted the attention of cosmic consciousnesses, and according to Asahina was at the center of a severe time-quake.

And if it had been given to Sasaki? What would have become of the SOS Brigade?

I couldn’t imagine it.

I shook my head to clear it of the pointless notion.

“So,” I said, my voice finally recovered, “what do you want me to do about it? Transfer Haruhi’s power to Sasaki? That’s totally impossible.”

Kyoko Tachibana looked at me seriously for a while, then giggled. “Not necessarily. If you cooperate, it can be done. If you and Sasaki both say you’ll do it. That’s all we want. Simple, isn’t it?”

She hopped one step backward.

“Let’s go back to the café. My business here is done, since I expect you’ll want some time to think.”

Come to think of it, what *had* happened to us? We were sitting in the café but had gotten up and left—what would that look like to Sasaki and the others?

I was going to ask, but Kyoko Tachibana was already striding back to where we’d come from. Upon reflection, a guy and a girl alone together in a world with no one else was a bit of a problem. This was no time to be thinking about that, though, and I didn’t want to stay here very long. It was too quiet. If there were some <Celestials> around, the movement would provide a bit of a distraction from the quiet. What was I thinking? Was I actually getting nostalgic about those things? What was wrong with me?

A few seconds after the girl’s form was swallowed by the café’s automatic door, mine was likewise absorbed.

“Hurry, sit.” Kyoko Tachibana sat at her original space in the center of the trio and placed her hands on the table. I sat back down in my seat, where my body heat still lingered.

“Close your eyes and put your hands out.”

I wondered what I would see if I left my eyes open, but I closed them and put my hands over hers. I listened carefully.

Kyoko Tachibana put a slight degree of strength in her grip—

—and then suddenly pulled her hands away. That instant, my sense of hearing returned. No—rather the world around me had been restored.

The Brahms Muzak, the quiet sound of the falling rain, the scent of roasted coffee beans, and the feeling of people all around me—these things all flooded

my five senses. I opened my eyes.

Sasaki raised one eyebrow. “Hey. Welcome back… I guess?”

When I looked, I saw Fujiwara feigning ignorance, supporting his chin with both elbows on the table, with Kuyoh’s dazed face showing no reaction at all. Between them was Kyoko Tachibana, who was in the middle of quenching her thirst with some ice water. I hit Sasaki with my question.

“What was I doing just now?”

“Nothing in particular,” she said, glancing at the small watch she wore on her wrist. “You had your eyes closed and were touching Tachibana for maybe ten seconds.” She put her finger to her lips thoughtfully. “So, did you see it? My supposed interior world?”

“Yeah,” I said reluctantly. Assuming it hadn’t been an illusion, I could say I’d been there and back. Although how that had happened in the space of ten seconds with neither Tachibana nor me disappearing from Sasaki’s view was a total mystery to me.

“Any thoughts?”

“Nope.”

“I thought not,” said Sasaki, chuckling. “It’s so embarrassing, like you looked into my mind.”

“Please, Sasaki,” said Kyoko Tachibana, setting down her glass. “The truth is you really are the best-suited person for this. Won’t you please try to think positively about it?”

“Hmm. I wonder.” Sasaki cocked her head slightly, then looked aside to me. “Kyon, what do you think? Is this weird power something I should have?”

This wasn’t the kind of thing you made a list of pros and cons to decide, and anyway, why was she asking me?

If I had to just make a guess based on my impression, even if she had that bizarre cosmic power, she probably would use it just because she was upset about the score of a baseball game, or make the events of a movie transpire in real life, or make August repeat endlessly, or have us dig up paranormal artifacts.

At the same time, she probably wouldn't put on a bunny suit and perform onstage in a rock band in place of an injured upperclassman.

But no, none of that mattered. It wasn't a matter of what Sasaki would or wouldn't do.

I feigned nonchalance and looked across the table.

Fujiwara the time traveler. And the other two.

The idea of getting along with them—well, let's just say that even jokes have limits. The time traveler had spit on Asahina's name, another had kidnapped her, and the third had trapped us all on a snowy mountain and caused Nagato to faint.

I wasn't even going to consider it. As much as I wanted to stay friends with Sasaki, if I teamed up with them, my body would immediately exhaust its supply of tranquility and would plunge right into negative numbers.

Just as I took a deep breath in order to make that totally clear—

"Sorry to keep you waiting." The waitress approached our table with four cups, just as I was about to speak.

I paused my statement, and the rest of the people at the table did likewise. This sort of pause happened during normal conversations too, but I definitely didn't want anyone overhearing what we were talking about and thinking I was flat-out crazy.

In the oppressive silence, the sound of cups rattling against saucers as they were set down was strangely prominent. One was placed in front of Sasaki, then me, then Kyoko Tachibana, then Kuyoh—

Snap!

Before my very eyes there transpired a startling development.

Kuyoh had been motionless up until that moment, when she grabbed the waitress by the wrist.

I didn't even catch her arm movement; I didn't even detect any hint of motion, but she held the waitress's wrist firmly, preventing her from setting the saucer and cup down on the table.

Kuyoh was still motionless and facing forward; no part of her body save her arm had moved.

“… Huh?” I said idiotically.

Even more surprising was that the waitress should have spilled the cup she was holding, but she’d managed not to slosh even a drop out of it. Given the rather impressive force that resulted from the initial wrist-grab, there had definitely been enough impact to spill the coffee.

So why—?

I soon understood.

“May I help you?” The waitress smiled mildly; she didn’t seem the least bit troubled. If anybody else had happened to see it, they’d think her smile was perfectly normal. But it gave me a terrible chill down my spine, and not for no reason. I knew the waitress’s face quite well.

“Kimidori…” I murmured in spite of myself. “What are you doing here?”

“Hello.”

Emiri Kimidori greeted me with a smile as though she were an upperclassman who’d just happened to run into one of her younger classmates—which was exactly what had happened. Her unfazed tone was completely unlike the reality of the situation, which was that a mysterious alien was currently grabbing the wrist of a humanoid interface. I didn’t particularly want to experience Kuyoh’s grip strength for myself, but it appeared stronger than average. Kuyoh paid the stunned Sasaki and Kyoko Tachibana no mind, and with superhuman precision was utterly still—school uniform included.

Displaying an unreal level of calm, Kimidori spoke. “Excuse me, miss,” she said to the silent Kuyoh-object, “might I ask you to let me go? I cannot finish serving your order.”

“—”

The unblinking, goldfish-like eyes were, to be frank, not looking anywhere.

“Miss,” said Kimidori in a serene voice. “If you please. You understand, don’t you, what I am saying…”

I wondered if I was the only one who heard the *crack* that came from the space between them, like a log splitting in a bonfire.

“—”

Kuyoh slowly loosened her grip. Her fingers opened one by one like inchworms, and once she had fully released Kimidori’s arm, Kuyoh returned her hand to her lap.

“Thank you very much,” said Kimidori politely, still holding the coffee cups, and placing one in front of Kuyoh. As Kuyoh returned to maintaining her tin-soldier countenance, I sighed in relief.

“What are you doing here, Kimidori?” I asked her.

“It’s my part-time job.”

I could tell that by looking. Why would someone besides a waitress put on an apron and serve coffee? I wanted to know why she’d suddenly gotten a job—I was more interested in the answer to that question than I was in the location of the Romanov dynasty’s hidden gold bullion.

But Kimidori simply left the check on the table, whispering to me as she did so. “Please don’t tell the student council president about this. Students on the council aren’t allowed to have part-time jobs.”

But she didn’t care if Nagato knew? No, wait, that wasn’t the important thing.

“Enjoy your coffee,” she said, leaving our conversation unresolved as she took the tray and retreated. She seemed used to the work, as though she’d been doing it for three years. Had it always been her bringing us our water and taking our orders? Had we never noticed because crowd psychology had made her invisible to us, or had she used some kind of space-alien power on us? My guess was the latter. If Kuyoh could do that, it seemed likely that Kimidori could too.

“Who was that?” Sasaki asked.

“A senior at my school,” was all I could answer, as I compared Kuyoh’s conspicuous-yet-totally-unnoticed appearance with Kimidori’s, as she efficiently brought water to a customer who’d just arrived.

“Heh,” came a strangely stifled laugh from Fujiwara. “Hah. Now this’s

something worth seeing. What a farce. You sure don't see this every day," he said, with a tone drenched in irony.

I wanted to dump my hot coffee on his head, but the time traveler seemed to be genuinely amused. His body shook with stifled laughter, as though if I hadn't been there he would've been guffawing heartily.

Kyoko Tachibana's expression shifted gradually from shock to resignation, shrugging as though openly admitting she couldn't keep up with these events. Sasaki and I looked to each other, both of us wordlessly asking the other what Fujiwara had meant, but of course neither of us had any idea. Kuyoh's pale face was faintly obscured by the steam rising from her cup.

Thanks to the sudden intrusion of Kimidori the unexpected part-timer, the trio of standard high schoolers (including me and excluding Kuyoh and Fujiwara) was totally dumbfounded, while the time traveler laughed like he was remembering something uncomfortable, and the android remained as quiet as a broken crystal radio, not touching her coffee. Just as I was thinking I was sick of this—

"—"

Without any warning, Kuyoh stood and walked smoothly toward the automatic door, moving more silently than a high-level ninja master. Despite the fact that people didn't notice her, the door's sensor did, and it opened. Kuyoh retrieved her convenience store umbrella and was gone. Perhaps she'd sensed the shift in mood among us. But what had she come along to accomplish?

"I should be going too," said Kyoko Tachibana with a weak smile. "I wanted to talk a bit more, but I'm rather tired. Sasaki, I'll talk to you later. Oh, and please leave the check to me. It's fine. Thank you for coming."

She spoke firmly, then stood and headed for the cashier. "A receipt too, please. And leave the name blank," she said, finishing paying and heading out into the rain with her umbrella after giving us a small wave.

As I wanted at the very least to stop being mocked by the time traveler, I decided to take my leave. I needed to get back to my bedroom for a nap with Shamisen.

"See you later, Sasaki."

“Sure,” said Sasaki solemnly. “I think I’ll be contacting you soon. I know it’ll be a bother. But Kyon, I honestly don’t want to drag this out too long. The next national mock exam is coming up, so we’ve got to settle things quickly.”

“You got that right,” I agreed heartily. She was every bit the Sasaki I knew from middle school.

Fujiwara had regained his arrogant expression as he listened to our conversation, but in the end said nothing, nor did he do anything to irritate me. While it felt as though Kimidori had shown up just to shock me, I could imagine that her goal had actually been to observe Kuyoh. If it had been Nagato facing Kuyoh, it seemed unlikely they could have accommodated each other, and I was just happy Asakura hadn’t come back to life. Even given my ridiculous life, I absolutely drew the line at getting stabbed again.

Having thus left the café, I don’t know what Sasaki and Fujiwara talked about.

And I didn’t want to know. Not then.

CHAPTER 3

α—5

Monday. Morning.

After I spent the whole of Sunday relaxing, both my feet felt light.

As we began to approach the middle of April, I'd managed not to accidentally head for the freshman classrooms, and as I sat promptly down in my designated seat, I faced the black-haired figure behind me and addressed her.

"What's wrong? Mid-semester slump hitting you early?"

Haruhi had arrived at school before I did, and she was slumped lethargically over her desk. "No." She raised her head and groaned, even yawning. "I'm just a little short on sleep, is all. I was up late. I've been really busy with things these days."

Now that she mentioned it, what did she do on her day off? Listen to late-night radio?

"I don't have to tell you about my private life." She sneered like a crocodile. "I helped a neighborhood kid study, cleaned my room, made plans for the week—all kinds of stuff. Although I do listen to the radio sometimes. Also I had to create materials."

I thought of the bespectacled little professor-kid as I asked, "Materials? What materials?"

"Hmph, you're such a child. Always asking, 'What's that, what's that?' Why is it that boys' mental age never seems to go up, no matter how old they get? Childlike curiosity is cute and all, but when you give me that prying face, it makes me not want to tell you anything. You're old enough to be figuring out what I'm up to on your own."

Was I somehow mistaken, given that the more I thought about the kinds of things Haruhi seemed likely to do, the less it seemed like she belonged at school at all?

“Kyon, listen. You’ve been in the brigade for a year. You need to learn how to read your brigade chief’s intentions and act on them ahead of time. It’s why you’re still such a low-level member. In my mental staff performance chart, you’re charging into last place.”

Haruhi grinned triumphantly, then opened my first-period Modern Japanese notebook and began drawing some kind of freehand graph on it with a mechanical pencil, just out of my view.

“To explain it in a line graph, it’s like this.”

The longest bar was Koizumi, and the ones labeled Mikuru and Yuki were about the same length. Mine was only good for about five millimeters of brigade service. Not that my feelings were hurt.

“The computer club president would be about here, and Tsuruya would be around here. Look! Even non-members are doing better than you! Your manuscript for the newsletter was a total joke.”

Was this because I wasn’t living up to my reputation as the first and oldest brigade member? The computer club president was kind enough to have bestowed five computers upon us, and I’d never outrank Tsuruya in a million years. Out of sympathy for the computer club, why not raise his bar a little higher? It was a small price to pay.

Haruhi looked like a home-team fan booing an opposing player for using delay tactics. “You idiot. Have some spirit! There’s only a month to go until the SOS Brigade’s one-year anniversary. We’ve got to start racking up some heroics! What kind of example are you going to set for the new members? Let me say right now that seniority isn’t going to get you anything!”

So she was using Nobunaga Oda’s tactics. Capturing famous enemy commanders was all well and good in the warring states period, but at this high school, only the student council had the power to defy the SOS Brigade as the cancer that it was. And Koizumi controlled the current student council president, and while Tsuruya didn’t seem to know it, her family backed Koizumi’s Agency. If

the president's corruption were exposed, I wondered if I'd be promoted up from foot-soldier status. Not that I wanted to be.

Haruhi seemed to want to continue her lecture, but the bell ringing and Mr. Okabe striding swiftly into the room cut her off.

Anyway—Haruhi was still trying to recruit new members? Goal aside, how did she plan to accomplish that?

There was no point in thinking about it, though. I was more worried about having run into Sasaki, Kyoko Tachibana, and that weird alien girl Kuyoh on Saturday morning. That time traveler guy hadn't been there, but he seemed likely to reappear, so that was another problem—but so long as he didn't pick a fight, I resolved to leave him alone for the time being.

I felt like my fighting spirit—the part of me that said, "Bring it on!"—was a stag beetle larva, and I was nurturing it through its chrysalis phase. He could bring whatever tricks he wanted. I'd make him pay dearly for every one. In boxing, a counterpunch was better than a jab. At least, that's what they were always saying in the boxing manga I read. And Haruhi was the kind of person who repaid all debts, favors, and grudges two hundred million-fold.

The history of the world was eloquent. The sorts of things you should never do had been recorded and passed down since ancient times.

No—there was no point in wasting words.

There was only one thing I wanted to say.

If you make yourself an enemy of the SOS Brigade, don't think you'll get off easy.

At lunch break, I begged off eating with Kunikida and Taniguchi and headed to the literature club room, boxed lunch in hand.

No matter where you went in the school, there was no place more stuffy than there—it was like a humidifier had been left on, and I didn't even have to bother to guess at what Nagato would be doing. She was following her usual movement patterns.

"Can I come in?"

Nagato sat in her chair reading some kind of western occult book and did not raise her head. “…”

“You gotta let me eat in here. The classroom is way too noisy. I was thinking it would be good to eat somewhere calm for once.”

“I see.” Nagato looked up, almost in slow motion, her gaze scanning me, then returning to her book.

“Did you already eat?”

“…” She answered me with a slight nod of her head.

It was pretty questionable, but investigating Nagato was not something done over lunch.

“So, about that alien Kuyoh or whatever”—I said, sitting on a folding chair and undoing the napkin wrapped around my box lunch—“she’s a minion of the guys who tried to freeze us to death last winter?”

Nagato used her hand in place of a bookmark as she returned her eyes to me. “Yes.”

“And you said she was similar to you, a humanoid something or other—”

“Probably.”

“And did she come here to observe Haruhi too?”

After a brief moment, Nagato answered. “I don’t know.”

Was that because their mutual understanding was imperfect? I wondered.

“Yes. It is clear that they are interested in Haruhi Suzumiya’s data alteration abilities. That is one of the reasons they dispatched a humanoid interface to this world,” said Nagato matter-of-factly. “They of the Heavenly Canopy Dominion —”

I stopped her upon hearing the unfamiliar words. “The heavenly what, now?”

“Heavenly Canopy Dominion,” said Nagato again. “That is the name the Data Overmind has provisionally assigned to them. This is a significant step forward. Until now, we had no concept of naming.”

Holding my chopsticks, I considered the meaning of the name “Yuki Nagato.”

“The name derives from their coming from the heavens, from our perspective,” she added in a flat voice.

“So where’s the Heavenly Canopy Dominion?” I asked, pointing at the ceiling. “Up there?”

“…” Nagato paused as though doing a seven-digit arithmetic problem in her head. “There.”

She pointed out the window, toward the ridge of hills beyond. I could tell that it was north, but I doubted what she was pointing at was something that could be seen with even a radio telescope. It didn’t matter what direction it had come from, anyway. Worrying about directions was for diviners.

“Nagato, do you think those jerks are going to toss us into another dimension like they did last time?”

“No indication of that is visible at this time,” said Nagato. She had raised her arm diagonally backward to point, but returned it to her page. “An interface capable of verbal contact has revealed itself. It is predicted that direct physical contact will predominate for some time.”

“That girl, huh…”

I thought about Kuyoh Suoh’s vague strangeness. I had plenty of bones to pick with the Data Overmind, but I had to admit it had good sense when designing interfaces. Nagato, Kimidori, even Asakura—I’d take any one of them over Kuyoh.

“I will defend against attacks from the individual designated Kuyoh Suoh. I will not allow harm to come to you or Haruhi Suzumiya,” said Nagato flatly.

She was the most reliable person I knew. But still—

Nagato reacted faster than my mouth could move.

“Or to Mikuru Asahina or Itsuki Koizumi.”

Or to Nagato herself, I said.

“…”

I looked very seriously into her fixed eyes.

She didn’t have any concern for herself, but I did, and so did Haruhi. I wasn’t about to let Kuyoh or anybody else from the Heavenly Canopy Dominion do anything to her. It was no fun being protected all the time. The amount I could do might have been as insignificant as a speck of space dust, but surely I could do something.

“…”

Nagato lowered her gaze to the pages of her book, and at that signal I picked up my box lunch.

There was no comparison with the day she’d first invited me up to her apartment, room 708. To think that a silence without any words to interrupt it could give rise to such a feeling of well-being.

Once afternoon classes had finished, homeroom had wrapped up, and we’d bowed to Mr. Okabe, he came down from the lectern just as my classmates were all noisily standing up.

The students who didn’t have cleaning duty had no reason to stay in the classroom, so just as I grabbed my bag and stood, gave my regards to go-home-club members Taniguchi and Kunikida, and made for the clubroom, I realized my mostly empty bag was much heavier than it should have been.

When I turned around, I saw that Haruhi had reached out and grabbed it. She had some serious grip strength.

“Wait just a minute.”

Haruhi was still sitting, and she glared somewhere in the vicinity of my ear.

“You know there’s a math quiz tomorrow, right?”

“Uh… I guess.”

Now that she mentioned it, I did have a feeling that the math teacher had mentioned something about it last week, but it seemed I was deficient in keeping such trivialities in my memory.

“So you did forget about it. That figures.” Haruhi sniffed in irritation. “You’re bringing down the SOS Brigade average with things like this. If you could just remember the basics you’d be able to get a decent score. Do that much, okay?”

What was she, my mom? Anyway, she had better let me out of my seat, or we were going to be in the way of the students on cleaning duty.

“How can you be such a slacker? Get your math textbook and get over here.”

Haruhi stood suddenly and dragged me over to the teacher’s desk. The students on cleanup duty were used to this and didn’t even bother looking at us, although their weird smiles did bug me.

Haruhi snatched my math book away and casually opened it on the desk. “Problem two on page nine is definitely gonna be on the quiz, so remember it. This formula too. This is an example question, so knowing Yoshizaki it’ll show up for sure. Where are the blackboard notes? Show me your notebook.”

I could only helplessly obey her rapid-fire orders.

“What’s this? You stop writing halfway through. You slept through the second half, didn’t you?”

So what if I did? She was sleeping during today’s classical literature class, I pointed out.

“If I decide it’s okay to sleep, then of course I’ll sleep. I don’t have to listen to understand that class. You just don’t get it, do you? Listen, you get annihilated by math and science, so that’s where you’ve got to put your effort.”

Haruhi underlined problems in my textbook with my mechanical pencil.

“I’ll tell you which ones you definitely have to do, so get those in your head. And don’t just memorize the answers. He’ll swap the figures around in the test. So to start with, this one, and this one…”

Thus for a while I stood there across the desk and took Haruhi’s special review session. Fortunately the students on cleaning duty understood and ignored us, so we did likewise. It was embarrassing. She could’ve at least done this in the clubroom, I said.

“That’s ridiculous. The clubroom is for doing club activities, not for studying. You’ve gotta protect the distinction between these things. Only a killjoy does boring stuff during time that’s supposed to be for fun.”

Haruhi looked bored as she pointed out the problems she guessed would be on

the quiz, explained a subtle solution, and didn't release me from the teacher's desk until I'd gotten all the problems right.

"I guess that about does it." Haruhi rolled my mechanical pencil for about five minutes before my brain was about to protest at being forced to work past its shift. This was after the cleaning was over and my other classmates had disappeared entirely.

"If you're still below the class average after this, there's no hope for you. You'll need surgery. Try to memorize this stuff before the midterms."

I could make no such guarantees. I couldn't be bothered with stuff so far ahead in the future. I shoved my poor, scribbled-in textbook into my bag while looking down at Haruhi's eyes, which glared up at me challengingly. I thought about saying something, but no words came, so I simply nodded up and down in an attempt to fool her.

“Anyway, this should get you through tomorrow’s quiz. If you can’t solve at least half of them, as brigade chief I’ll have to take remedial measures. And if it comes to that, I’ll be forced to make up practice drills for you, so don’t make me waste my time on that.”

Haruhi strode back over to her own desk and picked up her bag.

“Don’t just stare off into space like that. Let’s go. Mikuru and the others will be sick of waiting.”

I doubted there was anyone else whose ability to patiently wait rivaled those three, but that had been my intention from the start.

Haruhi’s quick stride made her hair brush against the tops of her shoulders as I followed after her. If I were being perfectly honest, it wasn’t as though I’d banished tomorrow’s quiz to the depths of forgetfulness. I’d just been planning to ask Kunikida for some pointers in the break before math class.

But then that had happened today, and the person switched to Haruhi, so yeah, I guess that can be classified as something I don’t really care about one way or another.

Catching up with Haruhi as she made for the end of the hallway took ten big strides.

Haruhi walked like the wind, with her usual pointlessly authoritative stride, almost like Shamisen when he heard a can of cat food being opened, and in order to synchronize with her speedy steps, I had to order my leg muscles to operate at full speed.

Thanks to that, we arrived at the clubroom very quickly, and Haruhi pushed the door open without knocking, coming to a stop only once she’d stepped into the room.

“Oh, Suzumiya, Kyon!”

Asahina ran pitter-patter up to us, wearing not her maid outfit, for some reason, but her normal school uniform.

The girl from the future had a troubled look on her face, and she spoke in a fleeting and uncertain voice.

“I’ve been waiting for you—actually I was just about to go get you. Um, I mean, actually it wasn’t me who was waiting, er…”

Haruhi wasn’t moving, so I craned my neck to look past the shoulder of her uniform.

“Ugh!” I couldn’t help blurting out.

Nagato was reading a book in a corner, and Koizumi was sitting at the table smiling his usual smile—all of this was normal and fine, but something totally unexpected was happening.

“Everyone’s been waiting. I didn’t have enough teacups to serve tea, so about half an hour ago I started serving them one by one… I… I just didn’t know what to do…”

I understood her troubled expression perfectly well.

I didn’t even have to check the color of their school slippers. The sense that they would be the same color we’d worn last year suffused the room. I suppose it would be unduly conventional to call the ambience “fresh.”

New first-year boys and girls were packed into the literature club room.

There had to be around ten of them.

They all looked at Haruhi and me with weird smiles on their faces.

There in the tense atmosphere, Haruhi finally spoke.

“… Are you guys by any chance prospective new members?”

Preceding Asahina’s and Koizumi’s replies, the chorus of ten boys and girls replied with a harmonious “Yes!”

Hearing their youthful voices full of unfounded hopes, I replied with a single inharmonious line.

“Oh, boy…”

β—5

Monday. Morning.

Thanks to everything that had happened the previous day, I was filled with complicated feelings, but I couldn't let that complexity show on my face. Given that this was Haruhi, whose powers of perception were as sharp as an all-purpose kitchen knife, she could probably twist my ill feelings around, rotate them 360 degrees, and arrive at the right answer.

So I had to keep the mask on good and tight.

For better or for worse, Haruhi had arrived at school before me and had draped herself over her desk lethargically, looking exhausted.

It wasn't like she would've been tired out by the daily hike up the hill, so I wondered if she was short on sleep because she'd stayed up watching a late-night movie or something.

It was convenient, though. I was only too happy to enjoy a bit of peace courtesy of an exhausted brigade chief, so I took my seat as quietly as possible and set my bag carefully down beside my desk.

I heard the rustle of fabric and hair that accompanied Haruhi raising her head slightly as I stared at the blackboard, which was as yet untainted by chalk.

Until the bell rang and Mr. Okabe entered the classroom in top form, I just kept doing that.

As far as sleep deprivation went, the truth was I was short on sleep too. Thanks to being forcibly transported by weirdos to another dimension for the first time in quite a while, head-clearing sleep had been hard to come by.

Also, I kept lying awake wondering if the phone was going to ring.

Maybe that was why.

I started to drift off in the middle of second period classical literature. The spring sunlight streaming into the classroom only exacerbated the irresistible sleepiness. I could hear Haruhi's sleeping breath behind me, and surely the sleep-study researchers wouldn't mind having one more patient…

… No, it was no good. The sandman that was assaulting me was a particularly high-level one.

Sadly, I fell into the hands of a short nap, and actually even started to have a dream.

A dream of something that had actually happened to me.

Memories of a certain day… in my third year of middle school.

…

…

…

At times in the ten-odd years of peace and limitless tedium, occasionally I would find myself thinking truly disturbing things and be shocked at this discovery.

For example, wondering if a military somewhere might have a missile misfire, which would then come falling down, or wondering if a satellite might fail to burn up in the atmosphere and instead land somewhere in Japan, or wondering if a meteor might crash into the Earth causing unprecedented chaos—not because I wished for a catastrophe that would throw my life into disarray, but just because I happened to ponder these things.

When I'd tell my friend Sasaki about these things, she would say, "Kyon, that's the modern entertainment syndrome. You're reading too many manga and novels," she explained with her usual courteous smile.

It was a term I'd never heard before. Obviously, I asked about it—what was she talking about?

"It's not surprising you've never heard it before. I just now made it up," she began. "Reality is not constructed the way your favorite movies, TV shows, novels, or comics are. And it's unsatisfying. The protagonists in the world of entertainment suddenly find themselves caught up in fantastic phenomena, sense trouble, and get stuck in situations that are hardly convenient. In many cases, the protagonists will develop wisdom, courage, a hidden talent, or pure strength of will to overcome their circumstances. But those are things that can only happen in fiction. And because they're fictional, they make for good entertainment. If the same things that happen in movies, TV shows, novels, and comics happened in everyday life, they would no longer be entertainment but

mere documentaries.”

I half understood and half did not, so I honestly said so. Sasaki chuckled throatily.

“In other words, reality is built upon hard-and-fast laws. No matter how long you wait, aliens are not going to attack, nor are ancient gods going to rise out of the oceans.”

But how could she know that? Was she saying that there were things in this world that absolutely could not happen? At the very least, the possibility of a giant meteor hitting the Earth wasn’t zero.

“Probability, you say? Look, Kyon—if we’re going to talk about probability, then nothing is totally impossible. For example.” Sasaki pointed to the wall. “If you charged directly at that wall, the probability that you would pass right through it and on into the next room is not technically zero. Ah, but you’re about to tell me there’s no way you can pass through a wall. But that’s not quite true. At the quantum level, despite the presence of an insulator that should never let an electron pass through it, it happens that electrons sometimes do pass through such objects and appear in a different place. It’s called the tunneling effect. If you consider that, given that the elements that make up your body are made up at the lowest level of particles like electrons, it’s not impossible, in principle, that you could pass through the wall without making a hole in it. However, the probability is so low that if you tried to do it once every second, you’d still never do it in fifteen billion years. So isn’t it reasonable to say it’s impossible?”

What the hell were we talking about now? As I listened to Sasaki talk, my own thoughts became less and less clear, and the conversation would end with my feeling sort of tricked.

A serene smile spread over Sasaki’s face, and she looked directly at me.

“About that, Kyon. If you were thrown into such an unrealistic story-world, it’s extremely doubtful that you’d be able to conveniently act like a protagonist. The reason they can wield wisdom, courage, talent, and secret abilities to triumph over adversity is because they’ve been created that way. But where is your creator?”

I remember not making a sound.

This all happened two years ago on a day in June, during a conversation between Sasaki and me in our third-year classroom in middle school. Sasaki had first become my classmate that spring, but we got along pretty well and thus wound up talking about all kinds of random stuff. Sasaki was the only person I knew who was reading the Ellery Queen series in its entirety. Incidentally, I was not reading it. I only knew about it from Sasaki's amusing recaps of what she'd read.

Sasaki happened to go to the same after-school cram classes I was forced to attend, so if I explained that our friendship was roughly at the level where you eat lunch together at school, you'd probably get the idea. I was the type of guy who basically liked reading manga magazines alone while I ate, but I was happy to eat with her. But we had no contact outside of school. So if I were asked whether I considered her a close friend, I'd probably have said no.

Sasaki leaned over from the next seat and put her elbow on my desk. Her glittering black eyes stood out from her other features. If she would have eased up on the roundabout logic and conversation, I think she probably would've been pretty popular with boys.

I decided to try saying exactly what I thought, for once, so I told her so.

"You sure say interesting things!" Sasaki made a face like she'd stifled an explosion of laughter. "I don't understand why someone would question whether or not she's attractive. I always want to be rational and logical, no matter the time or place. To accept reality as it is, emotional or sentimental thinking is nothing more than an obstruction. I can't help but think of sentiment as a crude shelter that inhibits humanity's progress toward autonomy. Particularly feelings of love, which are practically a kind of mental illness."

Was that so? I asked.

"There was a person a long time ago who said so. It was a very evocative phrase, so I remember it even now. I'll bet you want to say something crazy like without romantic love, there would be no marriage and no children."

I was silent. What *did* I want to say?

“Just look at wild animals. Some of them certainly seem to be affectionate to their children, to protect them, to raise them. But that’s not love.”

Sasaki quirked her lips, trying to seem more evil than she was. She seemed to want me to ask her, so I did.

“What is it, then?”

“Instinct,” said Sasaki.

Then she made me listen to a one-sided exposition on whether instinct and emotion were separate things or were they unified, and if they were unified could they be differentiated, which at some point shifted to a rhetorical analysis of whether human nature was fundamentally good or evil, at which point the shadow of a third party fell across my desk. It was Okamoto, a member of the beautification committee attached to our section, bringing guidance counseling application paperwork…

…

…

…

The chime sounded lightly, such that all I heard was its following echo.

I woke up before I remembered Okamoto’s face. I immediately confirmed my location. It was classroom 2-5 at North High. At some point it must’ve become break time. Haruhi seemed to still be busy dreaming. I could hear her quiet, regular breathing.

It was shocking that two people in a row had gotten away with sleeping in class. Close to a miracle. It might have been that the teacher had simply given up on us entirely, which might make Haruhi happy but for someone as academically lackluster as I was, this wasn’t something to be pleased about. Despite appearances, I did hope to go to college, or at least my parents hoped I would.

I’d used my open textbook as a pillow, so I felt my face to make sure there weren’t any marks on it, by which time whatever I’d been dreaming about had been mostly erased from my memory. Huh? I felt like there had been an important line somewhere in there. I knew Sasaki had been in it but couldn’t

clearly remember the contents of our conversation.

I flicked myself on the temple. It hurt.

So this was reality, and that had been a dream. It was easy to say, “Sure, obviously.” But sometimes I found myself needing to confirm that what I was currently experiencing was indeed real. I had to get some life into my retrospection-tending subconscious.

Sasaki, Kuyoh, Kyoko Tachibana—they were all real, as far as that went, but my position was not with them; it was here. Here with the slumber-craving brigade chief who was right behind me.

I could not let myself forget this reality, nor would I.

If it were ever threatened with destruction, I would restore it, no matter what that took. I was utterly determined.

It wasn’t because anybody told me to or for anybody’s sake. I didn’t want anyone to call me a hero or a philanthropist. It was entirely for myself. That’s what I’d decided, around Santa-day last year.

Come the lunch break, Haruhi vacated the classroom, and I pushed my desk up against Taniguchi’s and Kunikida’s to enjoy my lunch.

The reason I hung out with people I already knew was not because I found adding names to my list of friends difficult, but because I was already pretty good friends with these two and saw no reason to distance myself from them. Responsibility for this lay with the school administration, which had failed to properly move students around classrooms—so given that, I was just gonna keep being friends with the people I was already friends with.

“Hey, Kyon, can I ask you something?” asked Kunikida with an absent expression as he carefully peeled the skin from his broiled salmon.

“What?”

“Have you seen Sasaki recently?”

I nearly swallowed the pickled plum I was about to eat, pit and all. “… Why?” Surely Sudoh’s middle school contact network hadn’t reached Kunikida yet.

“Earlier, around the beginning of April,” said Kunikida, putting down his

chopsticks, “I took the national mock exams at cram school. I saw her there. We didn’t talk, though, and I don’t think she noticed me.”

Why was he asking about her now, of all times? I asked. The new semester started a while ago.

“Because I got the exam results yesterday. Complete with rankings. When I was looking for my own name, I found hers ahead of mine. Sure enough, her composite score was better than mine.”

Kunikida started moving his chopsticks again.

“And so then I started thinking that next time I want to score higher than her. Just as a rough goal. She’ll be my temporary rival. I doubt her score will change much, so if I can get my name higher than hers it would confirm my own ability. So I thought you might know which college she’s aiming for.”

“No idea.”

I needed to end this conversation and move it along as quickly as I could. Otherwise—

“Hey, now, I can’t let that one go.” Taniguchi grinned. “Sasaki, you said? You mean the girl who got along so well with Kyon in middle school?”

I knew it—the persistent guy had swallowed the bait, hook and all.

I immediately exercised my veto rights, taking a vow of silence and continuing to eat my lunch, but Taniguchi had the brazen curiosity of a cat. “What kind of girl is she?”

“She’s very cute. Smart, too. And sort of strange, honestly, but… in a strangely purposeful way, like it’s a performance. Yes, she’s an odd one.”

Sasaki had said Kunikida was weird too, I said. How appropriate.

“Is that so? I think there’s a difference in nuance, though. Sasaki is very self-aware, but when people call me strange, I don’t understand it. But she does understand, and she fits herself into that frame. I get the sense that she’s very careful not to go past its edges.”

It was true that her way of speaking was strangely formal.

“I was wondering if she’s still like that now. Because, I mean, didn’t she get into a famous prep school? Most of the students there are going to be guys. If she keeps forcing herself into that mold, I worry she’s going to get tired.”

Kunikida didn’t sound particularly worried as he said it.

Taniguchi popped a piece of broccoli into his mouth and replied. “She’s outta my area of operation, that’s for sure. I’ve had enough of weird chicks. Take Suzumiya—well, no, I never had anything to do with her. But look, why don’t I have any connections with nice, normal, cute girls? I mean, I’m running outta time. Gotta do something about that before summer’s here.”

All I could tell Taniguchi in response to his sudden rapid-fire speech was that he should do whatever he wanted. But I’d met Sasaki just the previous day for a meeting with three other bizarre creatures, and suddenly my appetite was gone. While it was obviously a coincidence that Sasaki and Kunikida had some kind of random connection, hearing her name with such strange timing gave me a very unscientific feeling of foreboding—an eerie unease as though someone were summarizing this story and telling me not to forget someone.

Was it a warning? Going by yesterday’s meeting, it didn’t feel like Fujiwara or Kyoko Tachibana had been giving off any particular threat or pressure, to say nothing of Sasaki. Ditto Kuyoh. And while she was plenty eerie in her own right, I had Nagato, and even Kimidori had been at the café. All of which made me feel like I had room to maneuver.

Just thinking about it, it was obvious that no matter what happened, the SOS Brigade would stay united. But the same was not necessarily true of their side. Their esper did not seem as powerful as ours, and their time traveler was more self-centered than Asahina the Elder, and their newly minted alien didn’t know the first thing about life on Earth, so the bond among the three was just as weak as it seemed. And the girl whose apotheosis they wanted to aid—Sasaki—wasn’t interested.

It didn’t seem like a cast of characters capable of taking out Haruhi. They should’ve done some more maneuvering, but even then they’d be half-cocked. What were they thinking? If they thought I’d be talked over to their side like some kind of weak-minded politician, they’d better think again.

I continued eating my lunch, despite the vague fogginess in my head, which felt like when you slept well but too long.

Taniguchi had shifted topics to whether there were any AAA-ranked girls among the freshmen, which for the moment was outside my scope of interest. It wasn't like there were going to be any new applicants to the SOS Brigade.

Because word of Haruhi Suzumiya and her brigade's heroic deeds had already spread throughout the region. According to Sasaki.

After class that day, just as homeroom ended and Mr. Okabe vacated the teacher's desk, Haruhi and I stood and put the classroom behind us.

Just as I was wondering whether we were going to the clubroom per the usual routine—

"Kyon, will you go on ahead? I've got to stop by somewhere."

Haruhi tossed her bag to me, then strode off like a curling stone sliding along the ice.

Could it be she had keener eyes than Taniguchi and had discovered an AAA-ranked freshman, whom she was now going to abduct? Surely not, I thought, but even if she had, there was nothing that could be done about it. I had long since developed the perspective that it was best to let Haruhi do as she liked.

It seemed the freshmen who joined sports clubs were starting their practices, and the former third-year middle school students now sporting freshman colors could be seen on the grounds and in the hallways—a refreshing sight indeed. "Fresh" seems a cliché word to use, but there really is no other.

If the literature club had gotten a new member, Nagato would've been able to show her upperclassman side a bit. She was, after all, a humanoid interface that enjoyed reading human literature to the tune of around three hundred books a year. I doubted that Nagato would appear particularly pleased if she gained some club underlings, given her always-on transparent force field, but surely having reading pals to exchange impressions and swap books with was more convenient than silently seeking out reading material on one's own. I had no skill at discussing books I'd read, and while I'd borrowed books, I'd never lent them. Maybe I should send her a library card as a gift or something.

As always, I did not neglect to knock on the clubroom door before entering, to confirm whether someone was there or not. Silence was the only response. I opened the door and saw that the room was empty. I was first, for once.

I tossed my bag onto the table and sat on a folding chair. I felt a tinge of loneliness, and as I thought about why that would be, the answer suddenly came to me.

Of course. Nagato was so reliably here that she was like an installation, but today she was gone.

I guessed even Nagato pulled classroom cleaning duty or had her homeroom period run long. Or maybe she was visiting the computer club.

As I waited for the other four brigade members, I picked up the hardback book that Nagato had evidently been reading and had left on the table, opened it to a random page, and scanned it. It seemed to be a story about a piece of equipment eternally searching for its original home.

α—6

After freezing for a moment, Haruhi gave her first order, which was to chase everyone save Asahina and Nagato from the room. The reason was simple.

“Mikuru, you need to get changed. Into your maid outfit, of course. The cheongsam… It’s frustrating, but I don’t think the size works for you, unfortunately. I’ll work something out later, so just hang in there until then.”

“Wha… change now?” Asahina held her own shoulders unsteadily as she watched the group of boys and girls obediently filing out of the room. “I…”

She cocked her head like a parakeet. Haruhi immediately held up a chiding finger. “Mikuru, what do you think you are to the SOS Brigade? I should think you’d be well aware by now, but just in case, let’s hear you say it.”

“Er… um… what am I? Um… what was it again…”

In contrast to the tremulous Asahina, our damned brigade chief seemed filled with the confidence of a mad cult leader as she thrust her finger at Asahina’s

nose and spoke in a haughty voice.

“You’re our mascot! If you’re not playing a sexy character, what’s the point? Of course, that’s not all you do. But those elements are what you’re founded on. And that extends to receiving new prospective applicants. If you don’t, it’ll confuse our new brigade members. First impressions are critical. I guarantee it. You have a gift, Mikuru. So put on that outfit and become our maid character! Got it?”

Haruhi grinned, making it obvious that she was planning something.

“Just wait a bit. And don’t let them leave! We’re going to hold an introductory SOS Brigade meeting. If anybody tries to escape, hit ’em with a tranquilizer shot and tie ’em up!” she said, then closed the door.

From inside the clubroom-turned-dressing-room, we could hear the suggestive sounds of cloth rustling along with Asahina’s half laughs, half cries. “Waah—Suzumiya, that tickles… yaaah!” Neither Koizumi nor I could see anything obvious to do, so we just stood there in the hall with the group of freshmen, watching them as ordered.

They should’ve escaped while they had the chance, but the tenish freshmen stayed right there just as Haruhi had told them to, eyes shining with curiosity and anticipation. When I counted, I saw that there were actually eleven of them. There were seven boys and four girls, and the green stripes on their school slippers proved that they’d been high school students for just shy of a month.

I wondered if I should say something—give them some kind of warning as someone with more life experience.

I glanced at Koizumi and saw that the lieutenant brigade chief in name only had his usual bland smile and relaxed posture. From what I could tell from his eyes, which radiated ease, it didn’t seem as though any of these students were plants from his organization. This was the same scene that played out at every other school: prospective members visiting a clubroom. Didn’t they know that the SOS Brigade was an unauthorized student organization? I asked Koizumi.

“Surely they do,” Koizumi murmured in my ear. “So far as I’m aware, the young students here are entirely sincere. It’s clear that they genuinely wish to join the brigade as new members. At the very least, there are no aliens, time travelers, or

espers among them.”

I hoped he had a reason to actually believe that, I said. Now that Kyoko Tachibana, that time traveler jerk, and Kuyoh Suoh had appeared, it wouldn’t have surprised me if some of their confederates had infiltrated North High and were trying to sneak into the SOS Brigade.

“We’ve investigated the background of all entering freshmen,” said Koizumi mildly. “And Kyoko Tachibana’s faction would hardly come here. The Agency has been monitoring them closely. Likewise, if an interface like Kuyoh were here, Nagato would hardly be unaware of it. And if there were any time travelers among them, that would actually be quite convenient. We could capture them and learn their true intentions. But I’m sad to report that among this group, there are zero potential time travelers.”

He glanced over the assembled students, his pleasant smile never wavering. “There are no problematic individuals here. As for what problems remain”—Koizumi lowered his voice even more, to a whisper, such that only I could hear—“it will come only from those people who Suzumiya admits as new members. She certainly won’t groundlessly bring them all in as members, so the problem is who—and how—she will choose. It would be nice if she left even one of them out. I can’t help but feel bad for those poor, naively courageous freshmen. They want to play with us, but they’re all just normal students.”

If some amateur were going to jump into the lion’s cage, I’d try to stop him or her, but if I couldn’t make it in time, it wasn’t my problem.

I took a quick glance, and from what I could tell of the ten-and-change students, they didn’t have any particularly outstanding characteristics. They just seemed very normal and young, but maybe I was biased, given that they’d been middle school students just a month earlier. Some grinned as though trying to hide their embarrassment, while two of the girls listened carefully, giggling. I got the sense that the girls in the group were looking at Koizumi and me and weighing us against each other, but my inferiority complex might have been making me think that.

I just stood there silently.

“Hey, all done!” The door burst open with enough energy to give the illusion of

a blast of hot wind, and Haruhi gestured inward. “Everybody can come back in now! Also, Kyon, we don’t have enough chairs, so go borrow some more—the computer club or one of the other clubs should have enough.”

Evidently she wanted to treat me like an errand boy.

“What, don’t just stand there, hurry and go! What’re the freshmen supposed to do in the clubroom? Hurry, hurry!” Haruhi gave me a rapid-fire sequence of abstract directions.

“I’ll go along too. One trip won’t be enough to bring chairs enough for ten people. Ten chairs are too much for him to carry in one trip.”

Koizumi straightened from the wall against which he was leaning, and I helplessly nodded to Haruhi, quickly scanning the room.

Asahina was in her maid outfit and standing next to the table. Perhaps because of the sudden shift of the boy-girl ratio of the room’s occupants, she was blushing like a shy young lady from a well-to-do family, her shoulders drawn inward. On the other hand, there was no change at all in Nagato’s positioning or activity level.

After knocking on doors all over the place, Koizumi and I managed to return with enough folding chairs to seat everybody, whereupon we saw the freshmen all lined up as though preparing for an inspection.

Haruhi was reclining in the brigade chief’s chair, Nagato was in her usual spot, and Asahina stood still as though she were unsure what to do, an obvious expression of relief passing over her face when she looked at me. Given that the normally low population density of the literature clubroom had suddenly been tripled, even glancing at all the people felt unnatural. You didn’t have to be Asahina to feel uneasy about it all.

Koizumi and I placed the folding chairs all around the table, and just as I was going to say something considerate to the still-standing freshmen—

“Everybody be seated.” The brigade chief snatched the opportunity away.

The ten-odd freshmen all started trying to offer one another chairs, but I finally saw them start to sit of their own accord, with Koizumi moving a chair into position against a wall and taking a seat, looking like a test proctor’s assistant. I

was about to do the same thing, when I realized there was no handy folding chair for me to sit in.

“Huh?”

Originally the room had chairs enough for all the members plus one visitor. We’d borrowed ten chairs, which should’ve been exactly enough for the applicants that were here. So why were we short?

I did another head count.

The number of freshmen here was… huh? Twelve? Had I counted wrong? I thought there were eleven in the hallway, but now there were seven boys and… five girls. I looked closely but couldn’t figure out who I’d left out. I got the feeling they’d all been out there, but on the other hand, if one of them hadn’t been, I doubted I would have noticed. One thing was certain—I did not have a photographic memory.

As I stood there helplessly, Asahina started to flail.

“Ah—there aren’t enough teacups. Um… I was going to make tea, but… oh, what should I do…”

It would’ve been easy to go swipe some plastic cups from the cafeteria, but as I was pondering the merits of serving tea to prospective freshmen members—

“There are paper cups in the cupboard. Just use those.”

Haruhi gave her decision, and Asahina quickly opened the package of cups and got them out but was immediately anxious again. “Oh—I’m sorry, there’s not enough water. I’ll go fetch some more—”

“Kyon, water. On the double.”

Desperately happy to receive orders from Her Majesty Haruhi, I made an exaggerated grimace as I ran to the water fountain, carrying the kettle in both hands.

As I returned, panting, all that greeted me was Asahina’s apologetically happy face. She rewarded me with a “Thank you so much, Kyon!” which was more than enough.

The suddenly even dozen students watched Asahina’s maid-clad form closely

as she put the kettle on the burner.

“As you can see, our SOS Brigade has an excellent errand boy and maid. Look all over the country if you like. The only brigade that has a maid that will serve you tea for free is right here!”

“Er, ah—yes…” said a bashful Asahina.

“Whoa!” said the freshmen.

What were they, stupid? It wasn’t something to be impressed with. For one thing, this wasn’t a place anyone should be going out of his or her way to visit.

“Also!” said Haruhi with a triumphantly haughty smile. “Mikuru’s tea skills are constantly improving. The ‘brigade tea’ she made earlier had a bizarre, fascinating taste. I like the name too.”

“Ah, that was… yes. I was being a bit ambitious with that. I’m so glad you liked it…,” said Asahina, like a dog praised by her owner.

“Whoa!” said the freshmen.

This was no time for whoas. It was time for an immediate about-face. That whatever-tea had tasted positively medicinal, and despite Asahina’s adjustments, could not be scored at all highly and certainly couldn’t be recommended to anyone save Haruhi, who downed tea in one gulp every time.

As Asahina happily went about her tea preparations, Nagato continued to sit in the corner and read, as though none of this was any of her concern. Koizumi had transformed into an observer. I stood beside the door like some sort of guardian as I was forced to listen to Haruhi’s speech.

“Now then, everybody. Aspiring to enter the SOS Brigade requires admirable courage. Thanks to the meddling of the student council, we haven’t been able to do any proper advertising, but still I knew. I knew that freshmen with pluck and guts had to be out there. That you’ve come of your own accord is critical. To be perfectly honest, I surveyed all your classes, and they all looked the same to me. But you are superior to all your freshman classmates who are not here. You should take pride in that! I guarantee it. But that’s not enough. This brigade, *my* brigade, is entirely different than other clubs, and so its members must also be. However! You have come here because you understand what it is that the SOS

Brigade is doing, do you not?”

What were they supposed to say in response to an interrogative like that? I didn’t really know how to answer it myself.

“Do you have anything you want to ask?” Haruhi pressed.

Perhaps it was unsurprising. One of the freshmen, a tall, short-haired boy, raised his hand. “I have a question.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“I’m not really sure what this club does. It just seemed interesting, so I came by. There was a rumor back in junior high that there was a weird club somewhere, and when I finally came to North High I found out that it really existed, so here I am. That might be a strange motivation, but is it all right?”

Haruhi stood straight and gave the boy an affectionately sad smile as she walked over to him. “All right, that’s as far as you go.”

“Huh?”

She grabbed the stunned boy’s collar and, with the power of a miniature crane, dragged him away, opening the door and releasing him into the hallway.

“Unfortunately you failed to pass the first test of brigade membership. Good try, though. Polish your skills and try again another time.”

Closing the door in the poor freshman’s face, she turned around. “Tsk, tsk. He shouldn’t have underestimated me. I, you see, as the chief of the SOS Brigade, carry the burden of overloading the world with fun. It’s no overstatement to say I think of nothing else. Thus I cannot afford to compromise, even when it comes to new brigade members. If we don’t progress year by year, we’ll start to decay.”

Asahina wasn’t the only one who was stunned—I, along with all the freshmen, was too. When had the brigade membership test started? That poor kid had some rotten luck. Even if it was in a paper cup, he’d barely tasted Asahina’s tea before getting ejected.

“Let me just say that I am very strict regarding laughter. Dirty jokes are categorically forbidden. Any sort of extreme behavior to elicit laughter is out too. Make your point with talking—just conversation. Here’s why I think—I think the

reason why people laugh is—”

Why were we now being subjected to Haruhi’s theory of humor?

“Haruhi.” Since members beneath the lieutenant brigade chief were useless in times like this, process of elimination led me to speak up. “What was that exchange just now? What’s this brigade membership test? Are you kicking out anybody who says something you don’t like?”

“I’m not that self-centered. I’m just trying to find out how enthusiastic they are. It’s easy to only answer questions. You just apply your mind relative to the question’s difficulty. So someone’s level is revealed when they ask a question.”

“So what was that just now?” I said, jerking my thumb at the door. “Was his question too low-level?”

“To be frank, yes.” Haruhi returned to the brigade chief’s seat nonchalantly and gave a generous smile to the now-one-person-smaller group of freshmen, as though she were the nicest big sister classmate in the world. “So, any other questions?”

It goes without saying that nobody opened his or her mouth.

Even once Asahina’s hand-brewed tea had been distributed to every one of them, the assembled freshmen had already been cowed, and they sat there in silence.

The only one talking was Haruhi, who recounted the history of the SOS Brigade like a storyteller telling the tale of the Ten Heroes of Sanada. She was exaggerating quite a bit, so I was only half listening.

Now that we were down one person, there was an open seat, which I dragged over next to Koizumi. The silent lieutenant brigade chief regarded the eleven freshmen—so there really were eleven now—with a wry smile, as though evaluating them. I gave it a try myself. Given that Haruhi evidently saw no need for self-introductions, she’d asked neither their names, nor their classes, nor even what middle schools they came from. I was looking at them, figuring I might as well give them nicknames based on their outward appearances, when my gaze stopped on one of them.

Let me just first explain so I don’t have a guilty conscience. It was a girl.

Of all the freshmen taking in Haruhi's one-woman show, hers was the only one whose face seemed composed or relaxed.

She let out a quiet cheer at the story of the series of home runs during the baseball game, covered her mouth at the murder story of the mysterious island before smiling at its conclusion, nodded repeatedly at the tale of the game battle against the computer club, and smiled happily at the story of the Sakanaka family dog.

This freshman was being awfully honest.

Given the height of the top of her head, she seemed to be about the same height as Nagato, and maybe a little lighter. Her hair was curly, as though permed but not blow-dried, and arranged with a smiley-face barrette that was arranged diagonally; it seemed sort of like her trademark. It seemed like her uniform size might have been a bit off, since its baggy fit was obvious with a close look. It wasn't broken in at all, though.

The more I looked, the more I got the sense that I'd seen this girl somewhere before. At the same time, I was absolutely positive that I'd never met her before. Far from it—I had no memory of seeing this younger girl in my memories at all. As I played them back in a montage, I straightened her hair, lengthened it, shortened it—but I couldn't remember her at all. Was she someone's sister, and thus I was remembering her resemblance to a brother? But I couldn't remember this hypothetical brother's face either. It was maddeningly elusive, like having a mouthful of hot vegetable soup but not being able to swallow because it was too hot.

My gaze couldn't have been very polite, but the girl didn't notice, instead absorbed in Haruhi's storytelling. It was fun watching her expression change. She was the perfect listener, seemingly ready to believe any lie.

"—So, that's how it was. The SOS Brigade thwarted the student council president's cunning plan and ensured the continued existence of the literature club. They may well be like cartoon bad guys that never learn their lesson, always finding another dirty trick to try, but they'll always lose in the end. Neither I nor the SOS Brigade will fall by the wayside. We haven't so far, nor will we ever!"

That seemed to be her concluding remark, and Haruhi thrust one hand into the

air and was still for a moment.

Just as I was thinking of looking for a place to set down the now-lukewarm cup of tea, Haruhi gave me a very strange look, even winking at me. Was her jerking chin supposed to be some kind of sign?

Just as I was trying to figure out how to reply to Haruhi's incomprehensible eye contact, I heard the sound of quiet clapping. The sound coming from palms that could be described as "compact" was a hesitant one, and the palms' owner was the freshman girl I'd noticed before.

The sound of the girl's clapping brought the rest of the freshmen to their senses, and they all started a sitting ovation. Asahina looked frantically left and right, then started hastily clapping as well.

Haruhi gave a satisfied nod, then incidentally directed a critical glance my way. Well, it was her fault for not setting things up with me ahead of time. She should've said something earlier.

Haruhi waved her hand to quiet the applause. "So, that's how it is. That should give you an idea of the SOS Brigade's mission. I would have liked to move on to the second phase of the membership test, but I imagine you all have preparations to make, so that will be all for today. Those of you with guts enough to try, come again tomorrow! That is all!" she said.

For the first time I noticed that Haruhi's armband read not BRIGADE CHIEF but EXAMINER.

"Dismissed!"

After the freshmen quickly filed out, Haruhi hummed to herself as she turned the computer on, clicking away on the mouse, clearly in high spirits.

Koizumi and I split up and went to return the borrowed folding chairs, so Haruhi was already well into her computer usage by the time I said anything to her.

"Just what are you planning?" I demanded of Haruhi's hair-banded head as I unfolded my usual chair to sit in.

Haruhi glanced up at me winningly, which was weirdly irritating.

“Those freshmen applicants came here expecting to join the brigade. But nothing you did is going to encourage them to actually do it. They’ll probably never come back.”

“Probably not,” said Haruhi, continuing to touch-type. “But that’s fine with me. If that’s enough to intimidate them, I don’t want them in my brigade. I only want members with courage. And not just courage from desperation. I’ve no use for any freshman who can’t pass the brigade membership test I made. The hurdle course is long, and the hurdles themselves are high. The SOS Brigade isn’t so desperate for members that I’m going to let in any mundane joker just looking for something to gawk at.”

Given that this club had zero reason for existing in the school, it had never needed more members at all, and I doubted the student council wanted to offer up any of the freshmen as human sacrifices on our altar. I certainly wanted to avoid increasing the population of this room. Asahina’s tea was not infinite, after all. Mobilizing the kettle and pot already took enough time and trouble as it was.

“Are you actually serious about getting new members?” I asked Haruhi as she sniffed Asahina’s freshly brewed tea. “Nagato and Asahina, and Koizumi too, you forced them all into the brigade. So did you actually spot any of the new freshmen to whom you want to do the same thing?”

She was probably still pursuing her break-time school-wide patrols, since she was rarely in the classroom outside of class itself.

“At the very least, I haven’t spotted anyone who’s got what it takes to be a mascot. But I think there might be some people who possess other attributes—ones entirely new that I’ve never dreamed of. Not people like you see every day, but totally new and unique individuals. I mean, how boring would it be if they’re all just normals, all going in the usual direction? Like girls with glasses working in the library and boyish, short-haired girls joining sports clubs.”

But who cared about that? It was better than having a pointlessly weird character deficit, I said. I, for one, would welcome anyone.

“Not me, not at all. There might be nearly infinite combinations, but you’ve got to think about how they match up first. This is the proof that the power of human imagination is getting worse over time!”

There was no point in her worrying about that kind of thing, I said. These didn't sound like the words of the girl who'd first dragged Asahina in here.

"Mikuru turned out to be a totally unique person, so it's fine!"

And anyway, I said, humanity had managed to get this far somehow. So we'd keep managing. It beat the heck out of making some strange leap of imagination and blowing the whole Earth away.

Haruhi showed her teeth, as though she were going to bite the edge of the teacup off. "I just want to find more interesting, eccentric people! Freshmen whose way of thinking is totally different from mine, who'll bring a breath of fresh air to the brigade. That's what the examination is for. It'll probably be a process of elimination. Otherwise, I'd be able to tell right away that someone has the special psychological makeup I'm looking for."

Haruhi set down her cup, and her hand returned to the mouse.

"What I'm doing now is creating the written portion of the brigade entrance examination. I was working on it last night at home too. Being brigade chief carries a heavy responsibility. While you were screwing around not even studying for the quiz, I was toiling to bring about a new future. Kyon, people in the old days had it right—we can improve ourselves by looking to others. What this means is to not look down, but rather up to where our hand can't yet reach! Without the will to get there, we'll only continue to fall!"

I had no interest in her clichéd lecturing. Besides, wasn't reaching for the sky what caused Icarus to fall to his death? Moderation in all things, that was the way to go. How did the old saying go? Eat only eight-tenths your fill, wasn't it?

Asahina's keen eye noticed that my teacup was empty, and she brought the serving teapot over.

She was now a maid from head to toe, and I couldn't help thinking that if she were to work at an actual café, her hourly wage would skyrocket. Come to think of it, what did she do for money? Was she funded by other time travelers?

Thanks to the room's lowered population, the room had regained its usual state, and I could finally relax. Aside from Nagato, whose reading posture never changed no matter what happened, and Haruhi, whose raucous lecturing had for

the moment ended, everyone else seemed more at ease and had returned to their usual positions.

Koizumi sat opposite me, and he set a new game on the table. “How about a round?”

It was some old game called Renju or something. Since I was already here, I might as well play. Sure, why not—it’d be good mental exercise. I told him to tell me the rules.

“It’s similar to five-in-a-row. It’s simple once you learn it.”

I placed stones on the board as directed by Koizumi, more or less figuring out the rules of play by example.

We continued playing until it was time to go home, and I’d racked up a streak of wins against Koizumi. I wasn’t sure whether I was quick to catch on or Koizumi was simply bad at it, but in any case this time-killing activity that did nothing to improve my academics continued for a while, but as evening arrived Nagato closed her book, which was the SOS Brigade’s signal to wrap up. We all stood, and after waiting for Asahina to change clothes, left school.

I wondered how many freshmen would come knocking on our door again tomorrow.

β—6

No one came to the clubroom. Haruhi was off somewhere else, which was all well and good, but it was rare for Nagato to be late. Maybe she was over with the computer club. Given that Koizumi was in the special academics course, he probably had a lot more to do now that he was in his second year of high school. It was a lousy class to be in. I’d heard that class 9’s instructor was more interested in raising his students’ academic achievement level than he was in actual education. Koizumi had to be angling for a good college—otherwise, he would never have chosen to transfer into such an exhausting class. The Agency probably could’ve helped him get in anywhere he wanted, and he’d probably just go wherever Haruhi went, anyway. As for me, I was putting off thinking about

any of that stuff. After a year and a half or so, I'd probably know my limits better. If we were comparing entrance exams, the chance of my achieving the same academic level as Koizumi was lower than an anthill. As for Haruhi—well, how should I know? She should go somewhere where she could make the most of her abilities.

Just as I was attempting to read one of Nagato's books, the individual capable of transforming the room's dingy palette into lovely pastels entered.

"Oh, Kyon."

The living negative ion known as Asahina carefully closed the door, then set her bag down like a field mouse returning to its burrow to store the acorns it gathered.

"I thought I was running a bit late, but it's strange that no one else has arrived yet. Where's Suzumiya?"

"She ran off somewhere as soon as class ended. It's spring, though, so maybe she just decided she had to run around."

Just like flowers that had saved up their energy over winter. Or camellia seeds. I mean, I could definitely understand wanting to run around. Winter had seemed really long.

Just as I stood to excuse myself from the room to give Asahina a chance to change, I looked back over my shoulder.

"Asahina."

"Yes?"

There was something pure about Asahina's eyes as she looked at me curiously, her hand reaching for the maid outfit where it hung on the costume rack. I didn't want to trouble those pure, transparent eyes, but my concern was a significant one, and we didn't get many chances to talk alone, so I went ahead.

"It's about that time traveler we met in February."

Perhaps detecting something in my tone, Asahina pulled her hand away from the outfit. "Yes, I remember."

I made a serious face and chose my words carefully. "What are they planning,

coming back to this time? I got the feeling that it wasn't just about observing Haruhi for them, but I have no idea what they're actually after," I said, feeling anxious. I wondered if it would be all right to tell her that the time traveler Fujiwara was back again. I wondered if I should tell her his name, or about Sasaki. Which of those were fixed events? Should I say something—or nothing?

"Um…" Asahina said, putting a finger to her lips. "Their goal is… well… I wasn't told. But I don't think they came here to do something bad. That's just what I think, but that's probably why I haven't been given any orders to do anything about them."

It seemed like it was difficult to say, probably because she was trying to avoid touching on classified information.

I thought about Asahina the Elder's face in profile as I spoke. "Did they come from a time that's connected to ours?" That was what I was most interested in.

"They are definitely connected," said Asahina, as though putting her thoughts in order. "Just like us, they used the same… er, method, to come to this time. Time travel using the TPDD, it… leaves traces in the time plane, so…"

She caught herself with a gasp.

"Wait, why…? This should be classified, but I was able to say it. Why?"

I'd been the one who'd asked, but I had an idea.

"Asahina, what does TPDD stand for?"

"Time Plane Destroid Device… Huh?" She put her hand to her mouth, her eyes wide. "How…? That's classified, but—"

They were words I knew, because I'd heard them from Asahina the Elder the night of Tanabata, four years ago. They must've stopped being forbidden terminology by that time.

"That sounds pretty dangerous, but what does it mean?"

"It means that when we cross the surface of the time plane, we…"

Asahina's mouth opened and closed like a fish's.

"… It's no good. I can't say it. It looks like not all the restrictions have been

lifted.”

She sounded almost relieved. I felt the same way. Too much knowledge beyond normal human wisdom could never be a good thing. It was a popular theory that if someone happened to hear the kind of classified secret that could throw a nation into chaos, he’d be hunted down just to keep him quiet.

I shrugged, and Asahina gave me a small smile. “I’m sorry, Kyon. That’s all I can tell you right now. But I’ll tell you more soon. The fact that the restrictions were lifted even a little is proof that I’ve managed to accomplish something so far.” She smiled like a dandelion that had managed to bloom, and said it again. “Really. I’ll tell you more soon.”

That was exactly the smile I wanted to monopolize by locking the room. Could I get someone to capture it in a photograph? I wanted to preserve this moment for eternity.

But instead of readying a camera or barring the door, I just returned her wordless smile.

I believe you, Asahina. I know all your hard work will be rewarded. And I know you’ll mature so much it’ll make me wonder just how much hard work you must’ve put in. I don’t know how many years it will take for you to bloom into Asahina the Elder, but for my part, I hope she doesn’t rush it.

The closer this young-looking senior got to Asahina the Elder, the nearer our time of parting drew.

Which meant that it wasn’t purely self-interest that made me wish for her to stay like this. Everyone would miss her. Especially Haruhi. On cold days without anyone to hug, there was no way she would be anything but sad.

As I stood guard in the hallway while reading Nagato’s book, the female brigade chief whose power could be felt with your fingertips came walking up, her tall, lanky lieutenant brigade chief alongside her like an unpaid bodyguard.

Seeing Koizumi with his sincere, refreshing smile made me think only one thing: he had rotten timing. If he’d come alone we would’ve been able to have a private conversation there in the hall, but with Haruhi along for the ride that was now a non-starter. I’d been inclined to tell him about what happened with Kyoko

Tachibana the previous day, but knowing him he probably already had the information. He might not have even been surprised to learn about Kimidori's job. I doubted there was anyone else in the world as hard to surprise as him.

"Is Mikuru changing?" I didn't know where she'd been running around, but Haruhi didn't seem to be out of breath as she walked happily up to me, brushing me out of the way and pushing the clubroom door open without so much as knocking.

"Wah, ah, I'm not—wait—!" cried Asahina in her adorable voice.

"All you've got left to do is the fastener. That's barely worth worrying about!"

I entered the room, dragged forcefully in by my sleeve. Fortunately, Asahina was exactly as Haruhi had described her, her apron dress on, back facing the window, frozen in place with arms reaching behind her—that was all I saw.

Haruhi flew past Asahina like a soccer ball kicked past the line of defenders, circling behind her to complete the final stage of dressing. Which is all just to say that she zipped the dress up and placed the hair band on her head.

I returned Nagato's book to its original position on the table and looked to Koizumi, whose head poked in the door like a Peeping Tom peering into the women's side of a public bath.

"What were you doing with Haruhi?"

"Nothing." Koizumi slid into the room like a seal swimming in the ocean, closing the door behind him, his pleasant bearing and smile never changing.

"We just happened to meet up on the first floor, that's all. It's not as though we were carrying out some secret mission behind your back."

"I see." That was the important thing, then. I didn't particularly care if he left me out, but I was sure he'd have gone happily along with Haruhi if she'd decided to storm the student council and demand operating funds. And that would've been a headache. I wanted to avoid school intrigue for a while, I said.

"Even so, the student council president isn't completely foolish. If he were going to make trouble with us, he'd find a better opportunity." Koizumi sat in his usual folding chair, directing a smile at Haruhi. "For example, if we started large-scale advertising to recruit new brigade members, he'd be all over us."

"I have no intention of doing anything large scale," said Haruhi from the brigade chief's desk, with a wave of her finger. "However, it would also be strange if we did nothing. I figured we had to at least infiltrate the club reception event. Reconnaissance by force, I think they call it. And just as I thought, the student council president came by with some nasty words, and there you have it—my observation of the enemy succeeded."

If she'd done all that just to gauge the student council's response, I suppose she was a decent tactician—but I was pretty sure she'd made that up just now. It was just *ex post facto* justification, I said.

"What does it matter? The outcome is the same, so the method is irrelevant. In the end, there's no difference at all between slaving away at a part-time job to earn a hundred thousand yen and returning a million yen to its rightful owner and getting a ten percent cut for your trouble."

There was a huge difference, I said. You might meet a special someone on the job (Taniguchi's theory), but more importantly, people didn't just drop bundles

of big bills by the road.

But our glorious brigade chief only sat down in her creaking chair, ending the conversation.

“The recruitment drive didn’t get us anywhere. However, despite the fact that there weren’t any interesting freshmen, they may yet be hiding somewhere. There may also be those agonizing over whether to join—but having thought about it over the weekend, they should’ve found the answers to any questions they might have had.”

Flashing her pearl-white teeth, Haruhi produced a sheet of paper.

“That’s why I posted this on the bulletin board.”

The following was written in Haruhi’s handwriting on the A4-size sheet of copier paper: NOTICE OF BRIGADE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION. FRESHMEN ONLY.

Beside me, Asahina had paused her tea preparation to read the notice aloud. She blinked rapidly. “Only freshmen?”

“You like things fresh and lively, right? Fresh fish makes for the tastiest sushi. We’re aiming for the liveliest students in this year’s North High catch!”

Was this a fishing port now?

“But, um, it doesn’t say ‘SOS Brigade’ anywhere on this.”

“If we talk openly about the SOS Brigade, it’ll bring the student council president down on us. This is a concession! I don’t like it, but sometimes a deliberate retreat is necessary to defeat your enemy. Writing ‘Brigade Entrance Examination’ should be enough. I mean, there aren’t any other brigades at North High!” replied Haruhi in the face of Asahina’s sharp-eyed observation.

Since there wasn’t a cheering brigade at our school, ours was the sole organization linked to the word “brigade.” If there had been any others, I’d have been shocked.

“Wait, Haruhi.” I had a more fundamental question to ask. “Just what is this exam? Are you actually going to make them pass a test to join the brigade?”

“Yup.”

Don’t say it like it’s obvious, I thought. “What kind of test?”

“That’s a secret.”

“When?”

“When the examinees arrive, obviously.”

I read the notice again. Aside from NOTICE OF BRIGADE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION, the only other information was in smaller letters below it, which read, AT THE LITERATURE CLUB ROOM.

Haruhi swiveled her chair around and looked out the window. “Between ‘brigade entrance’ and ‘literature club room,’ if there are any freshmen who can’t figure out what these two keywords mean, they shouldn’t even bother showing up. The SOS Brigade’s name is already well-known among people who know, and if they don’t already know, I don’t want ’em. Ditto for idiots who show up asking what it is we do here.”

I happened to be one of those idiots.

Asahina had a far-off look as she placed the kettle on the burner. “Freshmen… new members…” There was a note of nostalgia in her voice. I wondered if it was because she was realizing that she was a senior now and would graduate in only a year.

I gave the flyer that would only further confuse the non-initiated back to Haruhi. “Well, I hope there are a few people crazy enough to actually want to join the SOS Brigade.”

“We don’t need crazy people, but yes, hopefully a few will show up. Otherwise the brigade exam questions I made will go to waste.”

So that’s what she’d being banging away on the keyboard for this last week. I asked her to show it to me.

“No way.” Haruhi stuck her tongue out. “This is a brigade secret, not something underlings like you get to see. If you want to see it, you’ll need to rise higher in the ranks.”

I had no desire to do that, so I immediately abandoned all plans of advancement.

Having turned on the computer, Haruhi manipulated the mouse pointer. “However, the truth is that the questions cannot yet be said to be finished. I was thinking about them all last night as I made the flyer, and I was so serious about it that I shortchanged my sleep. It’s the brigade chief’s duty, after all. I only just stuck it on the board, so I doubt anybody’s going to show up right away, but if they do, we’ll just start with the practical exam first.”

Just how many phases were there in this test of hers? I asked.

“That’s a secret too.”

For the sake of the as-yet-unseen brigade applicant, I prayed that Haruhi’s preparations would come to naught as I sat down across from Koizumi. I saw that he’d already gotten the Go board out and the pieces ready.

“Care for a game?”

I thought we were going to play Go, but it turned out to be some old game called Renju instead.

“It’s similar to five-in-a-row. It’s simple once you learn it.”

I placed stones on the board as directed by Koizumi, more or less figuring out the rules of play by example.

A cup of Asahina’s tea in one hand, I played two or three rounds against Koizumi, racking up a series of wins. I wasn’t sure whether I was quick to catch on or Koizumi was simply bad at it, but in any case this time-killing activity that did nothing to improve my academics continued for a while.

Haruhi was typing something into the computer, Asahina was lost in reading a book on traditional-style tea, and Koizumi and I were lost in the game.

“…?”

I raised my head and looked around the room precisely as Haruhi noticed the abnormality, and we both spoke simultaneously.

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

Our next words overlapped as well.

“Where’s Nagato?”

“Where’s Yuki?”

Asahina straightened. “O-oh, now that you mention it, I made tea for her the way I always do.”

Nagato’s teacup had been placed next to where I’d put her book. The green tea it contained hadn’t been so much as sipped, and it was now cold.

There was a *click* sound, and when I looked for its source I saw Koizumi putting the Go pieces back in their container. On his handsome face, his eyebrows were minutely raised. That was his only response. The lieutenant brigade chief was silent.

“Maybe she’s visiting the computer club.”

Before I could even stand, Haruhi dashed out of the room.

What was with that impatience? Nagato wasn’t here—that was all; it wasn’t a big deal…

Haruhi returned more quickly than the most skillfully thrown boomerang.

“They said she’s not there.”

“Oh, er, um. Maybe she had a class meeting or had to stay behind for something?” said Asahina with tremulous optimism, but I’d never heard of Nagato serving on any of the student committees—not conduct, beautification, or even library.

They say that things are never as bad as they seem—wasn’t this one of those times? Nevertheless, Haruhi was fastest on the draw with her cell phone, and she immediately placed the call.

Haruhi’s school shoes tapped lightly on the floor.

We waited a few seconds.

“—Ah, Yuki!”

She seemed to have picked up. That was a relief.

“Where are you today?”

The silence continued for about ten seconds. Her phone pressed up against her ear, Haruhi gradually shifted her expression.

“Huh? You’re at home?—No way!” Haruhi frowned. “A fever? Do you have a cold? Did you go see a doctor…? Ah, you didn’t. Do you have medicine?”

Koizumi, Asahina, and I all looked to Haruhi.

Nagato had a fever?

Haruhi furrowed her brow deeply.

“Yuki, you’ve got to contact us when these things happen. We were really worried! Are you sleeping properly?… Oh, I woke you. Really? Sorry… You dummy, of course it’s a big deal. I can tell from your voice. Are you all right?”

Haruhi spoke rapidly into the phone as she pulled her bag closer to her.

“Enough, Yuki. Get back into bed and lie down.” Haruhi give Nagato several quick instructions after that, then hung up and removed her phone from her ear.

Still standing, she chewed her thumbnail. “This isn’t a matter of ‘oops.’ We should’ve noticed sooner. Kyon, did you realize Yuki was home sick today?”

If I’d realized, did she think I’d be killing time looking at her stupid flyer and playing Renju?

“There’s something screwy with Yuki’s homeroom teacher. He should’ve said something! This is a breakdown in communication. He’s a failure as a teacher!”

It was an angry outburst, but for once I agreed with Haruhi.

Why hadn’t I been told?

It didn’t have to be a teacher. Somebody should’ve said something to either Haruhi or me.

Nagato—why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you tell me something as astonishing as you missing school?

“Mikuru, get changed.”

“Ah, yes!”

“And hurry!”

“Yes!”

Asahina started removing her maid outfit without even waiting for Koizumi or me to leave.

Haruhi was fully committed to leaving the school. Evidently she couldn’t even spare time to turn off the computer. Koizumi and I were the same way. We immediately grabbed our bags and headed out of the room.

From the other side of the closed door, I could hear the sounds of Haruhi helping Asahina change, and for once the two of them were silent.

I had to make the most of this chance.

“Koizumi.”

“What is it?”

“Did you know Nagato was missing school?”

“What would you do if I did?”

“I’d blame you for not saying something. I’d take you to task. I might string you up, depending.”

“I swear that I did not know.” Koizumi’s smile was hard-edged, as though he were wearing a glass mask. “Nagato’s fever cannot be caused by Earth-bound pathogens. She is not a Martian from the past. It is probably the same cause as before.”

The events flashed before my eyes, and I felt chilly. A snowy ski slope. A phantom mansion rising out of a blizzard. A closed dimension. The single episode was enough to make me hate winter forever.

And Kuyoh. A doll of a girl with hair like waves on a stormy sea. The humanoid terminal of the Heavenly Canopy Dominion. She hadn’t done anything the previous day. I imagined that was because Kimidori had been there.

“It’s restarted its invasion, this extraterrestrial intelligence that’s not the Data Overmind. And of course, their first target is Nagato, the SOS Brigade’s strongest line of defense.”

Koizumi’s commentary had become suddenly serious.

“If they force Nagato into inoperability, we humans, who call Earth our home, will be all that are left. Unfortunately, the Agency does not have the power to resist non-corporeal attacks. I don’t know about the more powerful time travelers, but the current Asahina will surely be powerless. However…”

The only brigade members left were Haruhi and I, and I was well aware that I was the most powerless of all.

But Haruhi—

If she knew what had caused Nagato to fall ill, Haruhi would beat that person to a pulp. She would upend heaven and earth to save Nagato.

But what to do? Was this the moment? Was this it? Was this the time and place to reveal my joker, the trump card I held?

“I do not think so.” Koizumi’s voice was beyond rational and well into indifference—or was that just because of my psychological state?

“That is probably their goal. A trump card can only be played once. It has its power precisely because it can never be played again. If we act in haste, we may play right into their hands. In addition, this may be an advantageous position. I am unhurt, as is Asahina. If our enemy had committed to a full attack, we probably wouldn’t be able to move with such freedom. There have been no reports of Kyoko Tachibana making any careless moves. By analogy, neither has the opposing faction of time travelers. This is a unilateral move by the Data Overmind’s counterpart. As such, our reaction must be carefully considered.”

The instant I was about to reply, the door slammed open and Haruhi flew through it, pulling Asahina behind her by the arm.

“All right, let’s go! We’re headed straight to Yuki’s place!” were the first words out of her mouth.

Her face was near rage as she ran ahead.

And of course—

Not a single member of the brigade argued with the brigade chief’s order.

—To be continued in

The Surprise of Haruhi Suzumiya

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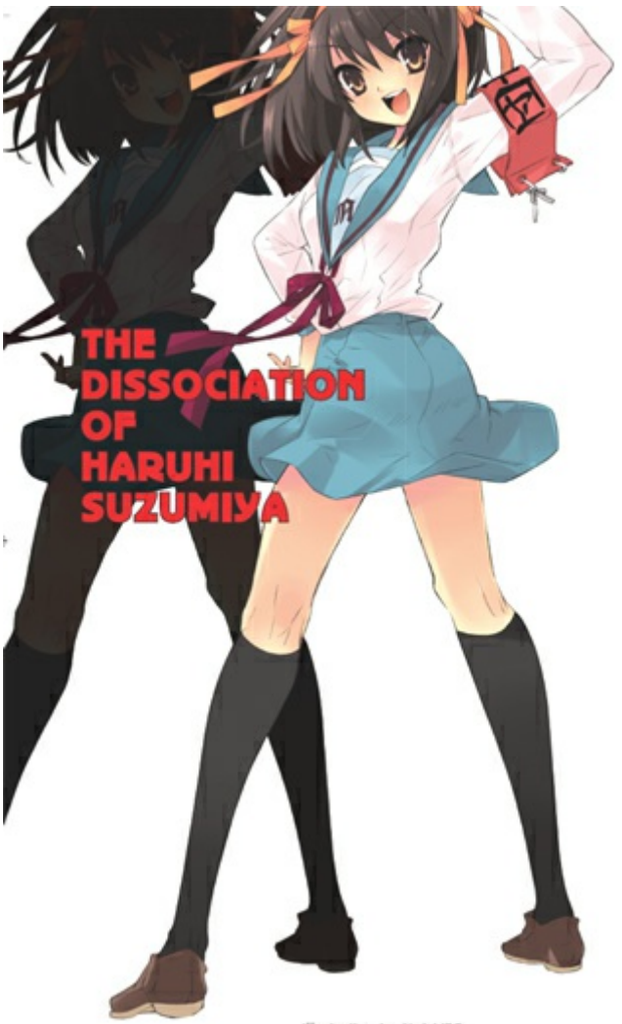

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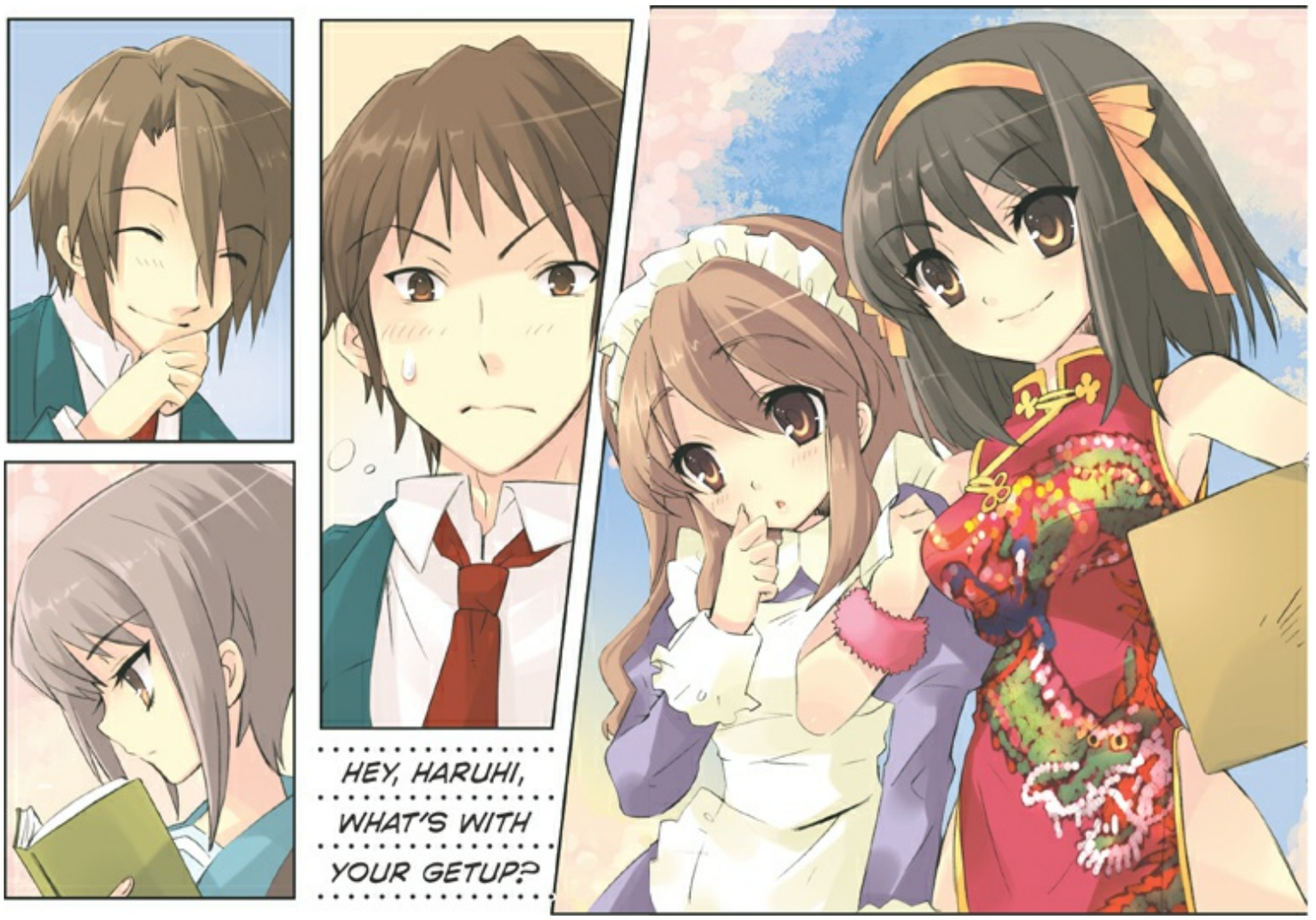
HEY, HARUHI,
WHAT'S WITH
YOUR GETUP?

"IT CERTAINLY WAS A BUSY SPRING BREAK," SAID KOIZUMI, LAMENTING. "I AM A BIT FATIGUED."

"WHO ARE YOU?"
AT FIRST I DIDN'T KNOW
WHAT I WAS SEEING.

TA-
DA!
THE
DISSOCIATION
OF
HARUHI
SUZUMIYA
NAGARU
TANIGAWA
&
NOIZI ITO
START!

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